

FIRST....!

Jesus Sets Life's Priorities For His Disciples

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FIRST

What Jesus Said Must Come First vs. What We Put First

INTRODUCTION: The Priority Problem

The Question That Changes Everything

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33, NASB).

With these words, Jesus distills the entire human dilemma into a single command about priority. Not a suggestion. Not a helpful tip for better time management. A command. *Seek first*. Put this ahead of everything else. Make this your primary pursuit, your leading concern, your foundational orientation.

The word "first" appears 184 times in the New American Standard Bible. It's a positional word, a sequential word, an ordering word. It establishes hierarchy. It creates structure. It demands choice. And Jesus uses it repeatedly to confront us with an uncomfortable truth: we are constantly getting the order wrong.

We live in a world obsessed with priorities. We create lists, organize our calendars, optimize our schedules, and manage our time with digital precision. We know the language of priorities. We talk about "putting first things first" and "keeping the main thing the main thing." We attend seminars on priority management and read books about essential versus urgent.

Yet despite all our organizational sophistication, we remain fundamentally confused about what actually deserves to be first.

The Great Reversal

The human condition can be summarized as a catastrophic reversal of divine order. What God says must come first, we relegate to "when I have time." What God says will destroy us if we put it first, we make the organizing principle of our entire existence.

Jesus says seek first the kingdom. We seek first security, comfort, recognition, control.

Jesus says first be reconciled to your brother. We say first let me make sure everyone knows I was right.

Jesus says first remove the log from your own eye. We say first let me fix everyone else's vision problems.

Jesus says first lose your life. We say first let me preserve, protect, and promote myself at all costs.

Jesus says first sit at my feet. We say first let me accomplish things for you, then maybe we'll talk.

This reversal isn't just about bad time management. It's about the fundamental disorder of the fallen human heart. We don't just struggle with priorities; we are constitutionally incapable of getting them right without divine intervention. Left to ourselves, we will always choose the wrong "first."

The Rich Young Ruler had everything organized. Successful. Religious. Moral. But when Jesus told him what needed to come first—"Go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Matthew 19:21, NASB)—he walked away grieving. His priorities were already established. Wealth was first. Following Jesus would have to wait.

Martha had it all planned out. She was serving Jesus, for heaven's sake. Surely that's what should come first. But Jesus gently corrected her: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42, NASB). Service wasn't the problem. The priority was. Presence comes before activity. Sitting at His feet comes before serving His table.

The disciples argued about who was greatest while walking with the Son of God to Jerusalem, where He would be crucified. They were literally in the presence of incarnate humility, heading toward the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, and they were concerned about their position in the hierarchy (Mark 9:33-34). Their "first" was personal greatness. Jesus's "first" was the cross.

The pattern repeats throughout Scripture and throughout history: humans perpetually reversing the order God established, then wondering why everything feels disordered, chaotic, empty.

The Danger of Missing It

Phillips Brooks, the great 19th-century preacher, captured the tragedy of misplaced priorities with devastating clarity:

"The great danger facing all of us is not that we shall make an absolute failure of life, nor that we shall fall into outright viciousness, nor that we shall be terribly unhappy, nor that we shall feel that life has no meaning at all—not these things. The danger is that we may fail to perceive life's greatest meaning, fall short of its highest good, miss its deepest and most

abiding happiness, be unable to render the most needed service, be unconscious of life itself as it passes by, and at the end not have lived at all."

Read that again slowly. The greatest danger isn't dramatic moral failure. It isn't falling into obvious sin or losing faith entirely. The greatest danger is spending your entire life pursuing secondary things while the primary thing—the one thing necessary—remains untouched.

You can be busy without being fruitful. You can be active without being aligned. You can be successful without being significant. You can fill your calendar without fulfilling your calling. You can win the world and lose your soul (Matthew 16:26).

This is the quiet tragedy that unfolds in a thousand unremarkable lives every single day. Not people who reject God outright, but people who give Him whatever is leftover after everything else has been attended to. People who intend to get to the "one thing necessary" just as soon as they handle the urgent things. People who genuinely plan to seek first the kingdom, right after they've secured the kingdom they're building for themselves.

And then one day they wake up—if they wake up at all—and realize they've spent decades arranging deck chairs while the ship of their life sailed past its destination.

Why We Get It Wrong

Our priority problem isn't primarily about time. It's about worship.

Whatever you seek first reveals what you worship most. Whatever gets the prime position in your life, the first fruits of your energy and attention, the best of your resources and devotion—that is your functional god.

Jesus understood this perfectly, which is why He embedded the command to "seek first His kingdom" in the middle of a passage about anxiety (Matthew 6:25-34). He knew that when we seek first anything other than the kingdom, we will inevitably be anxious. We will worry about provision, about security, about tomorrow. Because we've made created things our source instead of the Creator. We've reversed the order, and now everything feels precarious.

"No one can serve two masters," Jesus says just a few verses earlier, "for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24, NASB). The word for "serve" here is *douleuo*—to be enslaved to, to be in bondage to. Whatever you put first enslaves you. It masters you. It owns you.

When we put wealth first, we become slaves to the pursuit and protection of wealth. When we put reputation first, we become slaves to what others think. When we put comfort first,

we become slaves to avoiding discomfort. When we put control first, we become slaves to the exhausting work of managing every variable.

But when we seek first the kingdom—when we make God's rule and reign the organizing principle of our existence—everything else finds its proper place. "All these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33, NASB). Not because we pursued them first, but because we pursued first the One who provides them.

This is the great paradox of kingdom priorities: the way to get what you truly need is to stop making those things your primary pursuit and instead make God Himself your primary pursuit.

A.W. Tozer writes: "Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship."

When we all seek first the same thing—the kingdom of God—everything else aligns. But when we each seek first our own kingdoms, even our best religious efforts result in discord, competition, and spiritual exhaustion.

The Structure of This Book

This book is an examination of the biblical "firsts"—the things Jesus said must come first, and the things people in Scripture put first instead. Each chapter will follow a simple pattern:

What Jesus Said Must Come First – We'll examine the specific command or teaching where Jesus establishes priority and order.

What People Put First Instead – We'll look at biblical examples of people who reversed the order, putting secondary things in the primary position.

Why Jesus Prioritizes This – We'll dig into the theological, psychological, and practical reasons why Jesus's order is not arbitrary but essential.

The Way Forward – We'll conclude each chapter with practical steps for realigning our lives with kingdom priorities.

Throughout, we'll ground everything in the New American Standard Bible and draw from the wisdom of theologians who have wrestled deeply with these questions. Men like C.S.

Lewis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A.W. Tozer, and others who understood that following Jesus means fundamentally reordering everything we thought we knew about what matters most.

This isn't a book about time management. It's not about productivity or efficiency or getting more done. It's about the revolution that happens when we finally let Jesus reorder our lives according to His priorities instead of ours.

It's about what happens when we stop saying, "Jesus, fit into my life wherever you can find space," and start saying, "Jesus, You are first. Everything else must find its place around You."

It's about the terrifying, liberating discovery that Jesus doesn't want to be added to our list of priorities. He wants to be the priority that determines all other priorities.

An Invitation

If you're exhausted from trying to balance it all, this book is for you. If you're successful by every worldly measure but sense something essential is missing, this book is for you. If you've been a Christian for decades but feel like you've never quite gotten to the heart of what Jesus actually wants from you, this book is for you.

Jesus's invitation remains: "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness."

Not second. Not alongside everything else. Not when it's convenient.

First.

What follows is an exploration of what that actually means, what it costs, and what it produces in the lives of those who dare to take it seriously.

The question isn't whether you have priorities. Everyone has priorities. The question is whether your priorities align with the One who said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6, NASB).

Because if He is the way, the truth, and the life, then He must also be first.

Let's discover together what happens when we finally get the order right.

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

– Matthew 6:33, NASB

PART ONE: THE KINGDOM FIRST

Chapter 1: Seeking First the Kingdom

Matthew 6:25-34

The Context of the Command

Jesus is preaching on a hillside. The crowd is a mixture—fishermen and tax collectors, zealots and sinners, religious leaders and irreligious outcasts. These are people who know anxiety intimately. They worry about where the next meal will come from. They worry about clothing their children. They worry about tomorrow because today is barely manageable.

Into this context of perpetual economic uncertainty and survival-mode living, Jesus makes what must have sounded like an impossibly idealistic statement:

"For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matthew 6:25, NASB).

Don't worry about food? Don't worry about clothing? Easy for the miracle-worker to say. Easy for the One who can multiply loaves and fish with a prayer. But for the working poor gathered on that hillside, this sounds disconnected from reality.

Yet Jesus doesn't dismiss their concerns as unimportant. He acknowledges the legitimacy of these needs. Food matters. Clothing matters. Provision matters. He's not advocating for some detached spirituality that ignores physical realities.

Instead, He's about to reveal the secret of how these legitimate needs get met—not through anxious striving, but through proper alignment of priorities.

The Kingdom Priority

After establishing the reality of our needs and exposing the futility of worry, Jesus arrives at the central command:

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33, NASB).

Seek first. Two words that reorder everything.

The Greek word for "seek" is *zēteō*—to seek after, to strive for, to desire, to require. It's an active, intentional, ongoing pursuit. Not a passive hope. Not a casual interest. A deliberate, focused, sustained search.

And the object of this seeking? *His kingdom and His righteousness.*

The kingdom (*basileia*) is the reign and rule of God. It's not primarily a place you go when you die—though it includes that. It's the reality of God's sovereign authority breaking into human existence. It's the sphere where what God wants actually happens. It's the realm where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Righteousness (*dikaiosynē*) is the quality of being in right relationship with God and therefore living in alignment with His character and purposes. It's not self-generated moral superiority. It's the gift of standing righteous before God through Christ, which then produces righteous living.

So the command is this: make the pursuit of God's reign and right relationship with Him your primary, organizing, life-directing focus.

Not one of your priorities. *The* priority. The first thing. The thing that determines all other things.

And the promise attached to this command? "All these things will be added to you."

All what things? Go back and read verses 25-32. Food. Drink. Clothing. The basic necessities of life. The very things people worry about and strive for and organize their entire existence around obtaining and protecting.

Jesus is saying: Make God's kingdom your first priority, and I'll take care of the rest. Reverse the order—seek first provision and add God later—and you'll be anxious your whole life and still might not have what you need.

This is the great exchange at the heart of the gospel: You give Me lordship, I give you provision. You give Me first place, I give you everything else in its proper place.

What We Put First Instead

The tragedy is that this exchange sounds too good to be true to most of us. So we hedge. We keep one hand on our own provision while extending the other toward God's kingdom. We want the benefits of seeking first the kingdom without the risk of actually putting it first.

Scripture gives us multiple examples of people who faced this same choice and chose poorly.

The Rich Young Ruler: Wealth First

The encounter is recorded in Matthew 19:16-22:

"And someone came to Him and said, 'Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?' And He said to him, 'Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' Then he said to Him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adulter; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; and You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The young man said to Him, 'All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?' Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.' But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property" (NASB).

This man had everything organized. He was religious—he kept the commandments. He was successful—he had great wealth. He was sincere—he was seeking eternal life. He was respectful—he called Jesus "Teacher" and came with genuine questions.

But when Jesus cut to the heart of the matter—"What's actually first in your life?"—the answer became painfully clear. Wealth was first. The kingdom would have to be second.

Notice Jesus's diagnosis: "If you wish to be complete..." The word for complete is *teleios*—mature, whole, having reached the goal. The young man wasn't complete. Despite his religious observance, despite his moral track record, despite his material success, something essential was missing.

What was missing? Proper priority. He had never put the kingdom first. He had put wealth first and tried to add religion to it. And Jesus, in His mercy, exposed this reversed priority so the man could choose differently.

But he couldn't. "He went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property."

Mark's version adds a devastating detail: "Jesus felt a love for him" (Mark 10:21, NASB). Jesus loved him. And because Jesus loved him, Jesus wouldn't let him continue living with a disordered heart. Better for the man to walk away grieving over the cost than to walk away comfortable in his deception.

The rich young ruler wanted eternal life, but he wanted it on his terms, with his wealth intact, with his security uncompromised. He wanted Jesus to fit into his existing priority structure. And Jesus said, "It doesn't work that way. I'm either first, or I'm not Lord at all."

This man had put wealth first, believing it would provide security, significance, and satisfaction. And Jesus asked him to release it all—not because there's virtue in poverty, but because his wealth had become his functional lord. His treasure was his heart's true home (Matthew 6:21).

How many of us are living the same way? We've made our careers, our bank accounts, our retirement plans, our financial security our actual "first," while convincing ourselves that going to church and praying occasionally means God has proper place in our lives.

We're the rich young ruler in modern clothes, walking away grieving but unwilling to reorder our priorities.

Martha: Activity First

The account in Luke 10:38-42 reveals a different kind of misplaced priority:

"Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, 'Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her'" (NASB).

Martha wasn't pursuing something evil. She was serving Jesus. She was working hard to honor Him with hospitality. She was busy with holy things.

But she was "distracted with all her preparations." The word for distracted is *perispaō*—to be pulled away, to be over-occupied, to be too busy. And the word for preparations is *diakonia*—service, ministry.

Martha was so distracted by serving Jesus that she missed being with Jesus. Her activity, even her religious activity, had become her first priority. And in the process, she missed "the one thing necessary"—sitting at His feet.

Jesus's gentle correction reveals the heart of the issue: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary."

One thing. Not ten things. Not balancing multiple priorities. One thing is necessary.

And what is that one thing? The thing Mary chose. Sitting at Jesus's feet. Listening to His word. Being present with Him before doing anything for Him.

This is the Martha Syndrome that afflicts much of modern Christianity. We're so busy doing things for Jesus—serving on committees, running programs, organizing events, completing ministry tasks—that we have no time left to actually be with Jesus.

We've made activity our "first." We measure spiritual maturity by busyness. We equate impact with calendar fullness. We feel guilty when we're not producing, performing, proving our worth through effort.

And Jesus says, "You're worried and bothered about so many things. Only one thing is necessary. And it's not on your to-do list."

The tragedy is that Martha was sincerely trying to honor Jesus. Her motives weren't bad. Her work wasn't wasted. But her priorities were disordered. She put service before presence. She put doing before being. She put the good before the necessary.

And thousands of exhausted Christians make the same mistake every single day. We burn out serving a Jesus we barely know because we never sit at His feet long enough to hear His voice.

The Disciples: Status First

Even Jesus's closest followers struggled with kingdom priorities. Mark 9:33-37 captures one of their most embarrassing moments:

"They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, 'What were you discussing on the way?' But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, 'If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.' Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, 'Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me'" (NASB).

Picture the scene. They've just come from witnessing Jesus's transfiguration. They've seen Him deliver a demon-possessed boy. They've heard Him predict His own death for the second time. They're walking with the Son of God toward Jerusalem, where He will be crucified.

And what are they discussing? Who among them is the greatest.

They're arguing about status, position, hierarchy, rank. About who's most important, most influential, most deserving of recognition. They're jockeying for position in a kingdom they fundamentally misunderstand.

Jesus's response is brilliant. He sits down—the posture of a teacher giving formal instruction. He calls the twelve to Him. And then He turns their entire value system upside down:

"If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."

In the kingdom, first place goes to the person willing to take last place. Greatness is measured by service, not status. The one who seeks to be served is actually least. The one who seeks to serve is actually greatest.

Then He goes further. He takes a child—someone with zero social status, zero power, zero influence—and says, "This is who matters in My kingdom. The ones you overlook. The ones you consider insignificant. The ones with nothing to offer you in return."

The disciples wanted to be first in the kingdom while still operating by the world's definition of first. They wanted kingdom rewards with worldly priorities. They wanted to follow Jesus to greatness rather than to the cross.

It's the same temptation we face. We want to be important in the kingdom. We want recognition, influence, platform. We want people to know our names and acknowledge our contributions. We pursue ministry success, Christian celebrity, spiritual credibility.

We put status first and call it kingdom work.

But Jesus says the way up is down. The way to be first is to be last. The way to be great is to be a servant. The way to gain position in the kingdom is to stop pursuing position altogether and instead pursue the heart of the King—which is always bent toward the lowly, the overlooked, the little children.

Why Jesus Prioritizes the Kingdom

These three examples—the rich young ruler, Martha, and the disciples—reveal three of the most common substitutes we put in place of the kingdom: wealth, activity, and status. Security, productivity, and recognition. The things our culture tells us to pursue. The things that seem to make sense. The things that promise to satisfy.

But none of them can bear the weight of being first. None of them can be the organizing principle of a human life without eventually collapsing under the pressure.

So why does Jesus insist on the kingdom being first?

The Kingdom Represents God's Rule and Reign

When we seek first the kingdom, we're not seeking a thing or a place or a future state. We're seeking the Person and presence and priorities of the King.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was executed by the Nazis for his resistance to Hitler, understood this deeply: "The kingdom of God is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven."

The kingdom isn't escapism. It's not about waiting around for heaven while earth remains unredeemed. It's about God's heavenly reality breaking into our earthly existence. It's about what God wants actually happening here, now, in this broken world.

When you seek first the kingdom, you're asking, "God, what do You want in this situation? In this relationship? In this decision? In this moment?" You're aligning yourself with His purposes rather than your own. You're submitting to His reign rather than maintaining your own sovereignty.

This is why George Eldon Ladd, the New Testament scholar, defined it this way: "The essence of the kingdom of God is the personal acknowledgement of God's kingly rule in one's life."

The kingdom is wherever God is King. And God can only be King where He is acknowledged as King, obeyed as King, trusted as King.

So seeking first the kingdom means making God's lordship the defining reality of your life. Not just on Sundays. Not just in religious moments. In every decision, every relationship, every resource allocation, every priority determination.

It means you don't make any significant decision without first asking, "What does the King want?" You don't pursue any opportunity without first asking, "Does this align with kingdom purposes?" You don't spend your time, money, or energy without first asking, "Will this advance or hinder the King's reign in my life and in the world?"

This is radically different from how most of us actually live. We make our decisions based on what makes sense to us, what benefits us, what we want. Then we pray and ask God to bless our plans. We seek first our own kingdoms and ask God to rubber-stamp our choices.

But seeking first the kingdom means God gets the first word, not the last word. His priorities determine our priorities. His agenda shapes our agenda. His values override our values when they conflict.

Everything Else Flows From Proper Kingdom Alignment

Jesus promises that when we seek first the kingdom, "all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33, NASB).

This isn't prosperity gospel. It's priority gospel. It's the revelation that when you get the first thing right, everything else finds its proper place.

Think about what happens when the kingdom is truly first:

Wealth finds its proper place. When God's kingdom is first, money becomes a tool for kingdom purposes rather than an idol to be served. You're generous because the King is generous. You're content because your security is in Him, not in your account balance. You work diligently but rest peacefully because provision flows from the King, not from your effort alone.

The rich young ruler's wealth enslaved him because it was first. But when the kingdom is first, wealth serves rather than masters. It enables kingdom work rather than competing with it.

Activity finds its proper place. When God's kingdom is first, service flows from intimacy rather than substituting for it. You're productive because you're connected to the Vine (John 15:5), not because you're proving your worth through busyness. You know when to say yes and when to say no because you're listening to the King's direction rather than responding to every demand.

Martha's service exhausted her because it was first. But when the kingdom is first, service becomes sustainable because it flows from fullness rather than striving from emptiness.

Status finds its proper place. When God's kingdom is first, recognition becomes irrelevant. You're secure in your identity as a child of the King, so you don't need the world's applause. You're free to serve in hidden ways because the King sees and that's enough. You can celebrate others' success because there's no competition in the kingdom—only different assignments from the same King.

The disciples' pursuit of greatness poisoned their fellowship because status was first. But when the kingdom is first, you're freed from the exhausting work of self-promotion and reputation management.

Security Is Found in Seeking God's Purposes, Not Earthly Provision

The deepest reason Jesus calls us to seek first the kingdom is because that's where actual security is found.

We think security comes from having enough money in the bank, enough influence to protect ourselves, enough control over our circumstances. So we seek these things first, believing they'll make us safe.

But Jesus exposes this as an illusion. Look at what He says in the verses leading up to Matthew 6:33:

"Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?" (Matthew 6:26, NASB).

"And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!" (Matthew 6:28-30, NASB).

Jesus's argument is simple: If God takes care of birds and flowers, don't you think He'll take care of you? If He provides for creatures who can't worry or plan or work, won't He provide for His own children?

The issue isn't God's ability or willingness to provide. The issue is our trust. Our faith. Our willingness to seek first His kingdom and trust Him for everything else.

"For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (Matthew 6:32, NASB).

The Gentiles—those outside the covenant, those who don't know the Father—they have to seek first provision because they have no one else to trust. But you have a Father. A heavenly Father who knows what you need before you ask (Matthew 6:8). A Father who is good, who gives good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:11).

So the question is: Will you trust Him enough to seek first His kingdom and let Him handle the provision? Or will you seek first the provision and try to add the kingdom as an afterthought?

The Way Forward: Seeking First the Kingdom Today

Seeking first the kingdom isn't a one-time decision. It's a daily, hourly, moment-by-moment reorientation of your life around God's reign.

Here's what it looks like practically:

Start your day by surrendering to the King. Before you check your phone, before you start your to-do list, before you engage with the demands of the day, acknowledge God's lordship. "This day belongs to You. I belong to You. Make me aware of Your kingdom purposes today."

Run every decision through the kingdom filter. Before you say yes to that opportunity, before you make that purchase, before you engage in that relationship, ask: "Does this align with kingdom priorities? Will this advance or hinder God's reign in my life?"

Measure success by kingdom metrics, not worldly metrics. The world measures success by wealth accumulated, status achieved, influence gained. The kingdom measures success by faithfulness, obedience, love demonstrated, surrender maintained. Stop evaluating your life by the world's scorecard.

Practice kingdom generosity. When the kingdom is first, you hold everything loosely because it all belongs to the King anyway. Give more than makes financial sense. Serve more than your calendar allows. Love more than is prudent. Because the King provides, and the kingdom is worth more than anything you could keep for yourself.

Sit at Jesus's feet before serving Jesus's purposes. Like Mary, choose the "one thing necessary" before engaging in the many things that seem urgent. Relationship before activity. Presence before productivity. Being with Him before doing for Him.

Embrace kingdom values even when they contradict cultural values. The world says look out for yourself; the kingdom says lay down your life. The world says climb the ladder; the kingdom says descend to serve. The world says protect what's yours; the kingdom says give it away. Live as a citizen of the kingdom even when it makes you look foolish by earthly standards.

The Revolution of First Things

A.W. Tozer wrote: "The moment we make up our minds that we are going on with this determination to exalt God over all, we step out of the world's parade. We shall find ourselves out of adjustment to the ways of the world, and increasingly so as we make progress in the holy way."

This is what seeking first the kingdom does. It puts you out of step with the world's parade. It reorders everything. It revolutionizes your priorities, your perspectives, your pursuits.

You can't seek first the kingdom and remain unchanged. You can't make God's reign your primary pursuit and continue living for earthly security, status, and success.

But here's the beautiful paradox: when you lose your life in pursuit of the kingdom, you find it (Matthew 16:25). When you release control to the King, you discover true freedom. When you stop anxiously striving for provision and instead seek first His kingdom, you find that everything you truly need has been added to you.

Not always in the form you expected. Not always on the timeline you preferred. But always sufficient. Always good. Always from the hand of a Father who knows what you need and delights to provide for those who seek first His kingdom.

The question isn't whether you have priorities. Everyone has priorities. The question is whether your first priority is God's kingdom or your own.

And that question will determine everything else about your life.

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

– Matthew 6:33, NASB

Chapter 2: First Remove the Log

Matthew 7:1-5

The Uncomfortable Image

Jesus has a way of using imagery so ridiculous, so exaggerated, that you can't help but stop and pay attention. And few images in Scripture are more absurd than the one He uses in Matthew 7:

"Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:1-5, NASB).

Picture it: A man with a massive wooden beam protruding from his eye socket, stumbling around, trying to perform delicate eye surgery on someone who has a tiny speck of sawdust in their eye.

It's ludicrous. It's physically impossible. It's darkly comedic.

And it's exactly what we do every single day.

We major in fault-finding while remaining oblivious to our own catastrophic failures. We obsess over others' minor infractions while excusing our own major violations. We appoint ourselves as judges, juries, and executioners of other people's character while our own character is in shambles.

The log in our eye has blinded us to our blindness.

The Order That Matters

Notice the structure of Jesus's command: "*First* take the log out of your own eye, *and then* you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (emphasis added).

This is a sequence. An order. A priority that cannot be reversed.

Jesus isn't saying, "Never address sin in others." He's not advocating for a spineless Christianity where everything is tolerated and nothing is confronted. The goal is still to "take the speck out of your brother's eye"—to help others find freedom from sin.

But the sequence is non-negotiable: *First* your log, *then* their speck.

First deal with your own massive blind spots, *then* you'll be able to see clearly enough to help with someone else's smaller issues.

First humble yourself under the weight of your own sin, *then* you'll have the gentleness required to restore others.

First experience God's surgical grace in your own life, *then* you'll have the wisdom and compassion to participate in someone else's healing.

The problem isn't that we try to help people. The problem is that we try to help people while we're drowning in our own unaddressed dysfunction. We try to give sight to others while we're blind. We try to perform surgery while holding a chainsaw.

And Jesus says: Stop. First remove your own log. *Then* you'll see clearly.

What We Put First Instead

The human tendency is to reverse this order completely. We're experts at seeing others' sins while remaining blind to our own. We're professionals at judging, critiquing, correcting, and condemning—all while our own lives are a disaster.

Scripture gives us vivid examples of this tragic reversal.

The Pharisees: Judging Others First

The Pharisees were the religious elite of Jesus's day. They were the ones who knew Scripture, who kept the Law, who maintained religious standards. They were the guardians of orthodoxy, the defenders of truth, the self-appointed quality control for Israel's spiritual life.

And Jesus reserves His harshest words for them:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" (Matthew 23:23-24, NASB).

The imagery again: straining out a gnat (a tiny unclean insect) while swallowing a camel (a massive unclean animal). Obsessing over microscopic infractions while committing colossal violations.

They tithed their spices down to the individual seed—the smallest possible obedience—while neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness—the largest possible obedience. They were meticulous about the speck and oblivious to the log.

Their entire religious system had become about finding fault in others while justifying themselves. They measured everyone else's righteousness by standards they themselves didn't keep. They imposed burdens on others they wouldn't lift with their finger (Matthew 23:4). They loved the appearance of righteousness more than actual righteousness.

Jesus exposes this in Matthew 23:25-28:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

They had put judgment of others first. Maintaining their reputation first. Appearing righteous first. And in the process, they had become the very thing they claimed to oppose—full of lawlessness, uncleanness, and death.

The tragedy is that they were sincere. They genuinely believed they were serving God by policing everyone else's behavior. They thought their strict standards and harsh judgments proved their devotion.

But Jesus calls them hypocrites and blind guides. Because they had a log in their eye the size of the temple, and they couldn't see it.

How many modern Christians are doing the same thing? We're experts at identifying the sins we don't struggle with. We can articulate exactly what's wrong with culture, with the church, with other believers, with people who don't believe like we do.

We major in critique. We weaponize discernment. We make careers out of calling out everyone else's errors while our own lives are marked by lovelessness, judgmentalism, pride, and spiritual blindness.

We've put judging others first. And Jesus says: You hypocrite. First remove your own log.

Simon the Pharisee: Condemnation First

Luke 7 records a dinner party that went sideways:

"Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she

began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner'" (Luke 7:36-39, NASB).

Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner. Seems hospitable enough. But watch what happens when a known sinner—likely a prostitute—crashes the party and begins washing Jesus's feet with her tears.

Simon's first response isn't compassion. It's not curiosity about what would drive a woman to such desperate worship. It's not wonder at the grace that would allow her to approach Jesus without condemnation.

His first response is judgment. Condemnation. Dismissal.

"If this man were a prophet, He would know what sort of person this woman is."

Translation: "If Jesus knew how sinful she is, He would reject her. The fact that He's allowing this proves He's not who He claims to be."

Simon had put condemnation first. He saw the speck in the woman's eye—her sexual sin—and missed the log in his own: spiritual pride, lovelessness, self-righteousness.

Jesus responds with a parable about two debtors, one who owed a little and one who owed a lot. Both were forgiven. Then He asks Simon: "Which of them will love him more?" (Luke 7:42, NASB).

Simon answers correctly: "I suppose the one whom he forgave more" (Luke 7:43, NASB).

Then Jesus turns the knife:

"Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:44-47, NASB).

The indictment is devastating. Simon invited Jesus to dinner but offered Him none of the customary hospitality. No water for His feet. No greeting kiss. No anointing oil. The bare minimum of social courtesy.

Meanwhile, the sinful woman—the one Simon condemned—gave Jesus everything. Her tears. Her hair. Her perfume. Her dignity. Her worship.

Why? Because she knew she needed forgiveness. She knew the depth of her sin. She knew she had a log in her eye, and she came to Jesus desperate for healing.

Simon thought he only had a speck. So he offered Jesus nothing and condemned the woman who offered everything.

Jesus's conclusion: "He who is forgiven little, loves little."

It's not that Simon's sins were actually smaller. It's that his awareness of his sin was smaller. He had convinced himself he was mostly righteous with a few minor flaws. So he didn't think he needed much forgiveness. And therefore, he loved little.

The woman knew better. She knew she was drowning in sin. She knew she had a log, not a speck. And when she encountered the One who could remove it, she responded with extravagant love.

Simon put condemnation of others first. The woman put recognition of her own sin first. Guess which one left forgiven?

The Older Brother: Self-Righteousness First

The parable of the prodigal son is actually the parable of two lost sons. The younger son is lost in obvious sin—partying, prostitutes, pig slop. The older son is lost in respectable sin—duty, resentment, self-righteousness.

When the prodigal returns and the father throws a party, the older brother's response reveals his heart:

"But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him'" (Luke 15:28-30, NASB).

Listen to what the older brother puts first:

"I have been serving you."

"I have never neglected a command."

"You have never given *me* anything."

"This *son of yours*" (not "my brother").

His entire orientation is self-focused, self-righteous, self-pitying. He's kept all the rules. He's done all the right things. And he's furious that grace is being extended to someone who doesn't deserve it.

He sees the speck in his brother's eye with crystal clarity. Wasted money. Sexual immorality. Disrespect to the father. He can catalog every failure.

But he's completely blind to the log in his own eye: lovelessness, judgmentalism, pride, a mercenary view of relationship with his father.

He thinks he's the righteous one. The obedient one. The one who deserves celebration. Meanwhile, his heart is a wasteland of resentment and self-righteousness.

The father's response is tender but clear:

"Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:31-32, NASB).

Translation: "You don't understand. This isn't about deserving. It's about grace. Your brother was dead—now he's alive. He was lost—now he's found. How can we not celebrate?"

The parable ends without telling us if the older brother ever went into the party. We don't know if he ever removed the log of self-righteousness from his eye. We don't know if he ever recognized that he was just as lost as his brother—just lost in a different way.

But we do know this: as long as he put his own righteousness first and judgment of his brother first, he remained outside the celebration. Outside the joy. Outside the fellowship.

Charles Spurgeon understood this dynamic perfectly: "Self-righteousness is the devil's masterpiece to make us think well of ourselves."

The older brother thought well of himself. He thought he had it all together. He thought his obedience earned him something. And that self-righteousness blinded him to his own desperate need for grace.

Why Jesus Prioritizes Self-Examination

Jesus doesn't command us to remove the log from our own eye first because He's being arbitrary or difficult. He prioritizes this order because it's the only order that works.

Self-Deception Blinds Us to Truth

The most dangerous lies are the ones we tell ourselves about ourselves.

We convince ourselves we're more righteous than we are. More loving than we are. More humble than we are. More spiritually mature than we are.

We develop sophisticated systems of self-justification that explain away our sin while magnifying others' sin. We create categories where our failures are "mistakes" or "struggles" while others' failures are "rebellion" or "sin."

We're like the man in James 1:23-24: "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was" (NASB).

We look in the mirror of God's Word, see our true condition, and then immediately forget. We walk away convinced we're fine. The log is still there, but we don't see it anymore.

This is why Jesus uses the word "hypocrite" in Matthew 7:5. A hypocrite is an actor, someone playing a role, someone pretending to be something they're not. When we judge others while ignoring our own sin, we're performing. We're acting righteous while being unrighteous.

And the performance is so convincing that we fool ourselves.

Thomas Merton understood this: "The recognition of our own poverty is the beginning of knowledge."

Until we see our poverty—our sin, our brokenness, our desperate need—we can't truly know anything. We can accumulate information, but we can't possess wisdom. We can critique others, but we can't help them.

Real knowledge begins with honest self-assessment. With seeing the log. With admitting we're blind.

We Cannot Help Others While Drowning in Our Own Issues

Imagine you're drowning in the ocean. You're gasping for air, thrashing in the water, going under for the third time. And someone else is drowning twenty feet away from you.

Can you help them? No. You need to be rescued yourself before you can rescue anyone else. If you try to save them while you're drowning, you'll both go under.

This is Jesus's point. You can't perform eye surgery while you have a log protruding from your own eye socket. You can't help someone with their small problem while you're catastrophically compromised by your own large problem.

The Pharisees couldn't help people find freedom from sin because they were enslaved to a different kind of sin—the respectable sin of pride and self-righteousness. Simon couldn't

minister grace to the sinful woman because he hadn't experienced grace himself. The older brother couldn't celebrate his brother's restoration because he was imprisoned by resentment.

They were all trying to help from a position of unhealth. And it doesn't work.

This is why so much Christian "ministry" is actually destructive. People with unhealed wounds trying to heal others. People with unaddressed sin trying to address others' sin. People who haven't experienced grace trying to extend grace.

It's like a surgeon performing heart surgery while having a heart attack. The credentials might be in order. The intentions might be good. But the outcome will be catastrophic.

Jesus is saying: Get healthy first. Deal with your own sin first. Experience your own healing first. *Then* you'll be equipped to help others.

Humility Precedes Healing Ministry

When you first remove the log from your own eye, something remarkable happens: you become gentle with others.

You stop being shocked by sin because you've confronted the depth of your own sin. You stop being harsh with strugglers because you remember your own struggle. You stop being judgmental of failures because you've cataloged your own failures.

Paul writes in Galatians 6:1: "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted" (NASB).

Notice the progression: If someone is caught in sin, restore them with *gentleness*. Why gentleness? Because you're looking to yourself. You're aware of your own capacity for the same sin. You're remembering the log you had (or still have) in your own eye.

This creates the humility necessary for healing ministry.

People don't need more self-righteous judges. They need fellow strugglers who have experienced grace and can point them toward the same grace. They need people who can say, "I've been where you are. I know what it's like to be blind. Let me tell you about the One who gave me sight."

That's the ministry that actually helps. Not condemnation from a place of superiority. But restoration from a place of shared brokenness and experienced grace.

When you've had the log removed from your own eye, you're terrified of getting another one. You walk carefully. You examine your own heart constantly. You're quick to confess and slow to judge.

And from that posture of humility, you can actually help take the speck out of your brother's eye. Not with violence or force. Not with pride or superiority. But with the gentle hands of someone who knows what it's like to need surgery and who has experienced the Surgeon's skill.

The Way Forward: First Removing Your Own Log

So how do we actually do this? How do we remove the log from our own eye?

Invite the Holy Spirit to Search You

David's prayer in Psalm 139:23-24 should become our daily prayer:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way" (NASB).

We can't see our own log. We're blind to our blindness. We need God to reveal it to us.

So we pray: "God, show me what I'm not seeing. Reveal the sin I'm excusing. Expose the pride I'm justifying. Make me aware of the log so I can deal with it."

This is a dangerous prayer. God will answer it. And it won't be comfortable.

But it's the only way to move from blindness to sight.

Practice Ruthless Self-Examination Before Examining Others

Before you critique someone else's parenting, examine your own. Before you judge someone else's marriage, examine your own. Before you condemn someone else's choices, examine your own.

Make it a discipline: every time you're tempted to judge, turn the lens on yourself first.

"That person is so prideful." → Am I prideful?

"They're so controlling." → Where am I controlling?

"They need to deal with their anger." → How am I with my anger?

Often, the sins we most quickly see in others are the sins most present in ourselves. We're experts at diagnosing in others what we're blind to in ourselves.

So use your judgment of others as a mirror. What you see in them might be what you need to see in yourself.

Confess Specifically, Not Generally

We're masters of vague confession: "God, forgive me for being a sinner." That costs us nothing and changes nothing.

Specific confession requires specific self-examination: "God, I was harsh with my wife this morning because I was more concerned about being right than being loving. I spoke to my coworker with contempt because I was threatened by their success. I neglected time with You because I prioritized my own agenda."

Name the log. Describe its size and shape. Acknowledge its presence without excuse or minimization.

Only then can it be removed.

Remember You're Not the Surgeon

Here's the liberating truth: you can't remove your own log. You can acknowledge it. You can confess it. You can stop pretending it's not there.

But the removal is God's work, not yours.

Jesus is the Surgeon. The Holy Spirit is the one who convicts, cleanses, and transforms. Your job is to stop hiding, stop defending, stop justifying, and let Him work.

This takes the pressure off. You don't have to be perfect before you can help others. You just have to be honest about your imperfection and actively pursuing healing.

Extend to Others the Grace You Need Yourself

When you're aware of the log in your own eye, you become gracious with specks in others' eyes.

You stop being shocked by their sin because you're not shocked by your own anymore. You stop being harsh because you know harshness doesn't produce transformation—grace does.

You become the kind of person who can "restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (Galatians 6:1) because you know you're one bad day away from needing restoration yourself.

The Paradox of Sight

Here's the beautiful irony: the moment you admit you're blind is the moment you begin to see.

The Pharisees thought they could see, so they remained blind (John 9:41). The sinful woman knew she was blind, so Jesus gave her sight.

When you acknowledge the log in your eye, when you stop pretending you have it all together, when you confess your poverty and blindness and desperate need—that's when Jesus can heal you.

And once you've been healed, once you've experienced the removal of the log, once you've been given sight after blindness—then, and only then, are you equipped to help your brother with his speck.

Not from a place of superiority, but from a place of shared struggle and experienced grace.

Not as a judge, but as a fellow patient who can say, "I know the Surgeon. Let me introduce you."

The order matters. *First* your log. *Then* their speck.

It's not the order we prefer. We'd rather fix everyone else and ignore ourselves. We'd rather be the healer than the patient. We'd rather judge than be judged.

But Jesus's way is always better. Always more true. Always more life-giving.

First remove the log from your own eye. Then you'll see clearly.

And what you'll see when your vision is clear isn't how sinful everyone else is. What you'll see is how much grace is available, how desperately everyone needs it, and how privileged you are to point them toward the One who gives it freely.

"You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

– Matthew 7:5, NASB

Chapter 3: First Be Reconciled

Matthew 5:23-24

The Worship That Never Reaches God

Imagine you're at church on Sunday morning. The worship band is playing. People around you have their hands raised, eyes closed, voices lifted in praise. You're standing there with your offering in hand—your tithe, your gift, your sacrifice. You've come to worship God, to give Him what He deserves, to fulfill your religious duty.

And then, in the middle of the song, in the middle of the service, in the middle of your carefully orchestrated spiritual moment, you remember something.

You remember that your brother has something against you. There's an unresolved conflict. A broken relationship. A wound you caused that you never addressed. An offense you committed that you never made right.

What do you do?

According to conventional religious wisdom, you stay put. You're in church, for heaven's sake. You're in the middle of worship. God comes first, right? You can deal with that relationship issue later. After the service. After lunch. Next week. Someday.

But Jesus says something that should stop us cold:

"Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering" (Matthew 5:23-24, NASB).

Read that again slowly.

Leave your offering. Walk away from the altar. In the middle of worship. In the middle of your religious act. In the middle of what you came to do.

Go. Don't wait. Don't finish the service first. Don't make it convenient. Go. Now.

First be reconciled to your brother. This comes before your offering. Before your worship. Before your religious activity.

Then come and present your offering. Only after reconciliation is your worship acceptable.

This is one of the most shocking, disruptive, uncomfortable commands in all of Scripture. Jesus is saying that God would rather have you walk out of church in the middle of worship to go reconcile with someone than stay and complete your act of worship with unreconciled relationships in your life.

Relationship takes priority over religion. Reconciliation takes priority over ritual. Horizontal relationships with people take priority over vertical worship of God.

Or more accurately: horizontal relationships with people *are* vertical worship of God.

The Heart of the Command

To understand the weight of this command, we need to understand the context. Jesus is describing worship in the Jewish temple system. You've brought your offering—an animal sacrifice, grain offering, or financial gift. You've traveled to Jerusalem. You've entered the temple courts. You're standing at the altar, ready to present your sacrifice to God through the priest.

This is the most sacred act in Jewish religious life. This is the pinnacle of worship. This is you approaching holy God through the prescribed means. Everything has led to this moment.

And Jesus says: If in this moment you remember that your brother has something against you—stop. Leave. Go make it right. *Then* come back.

Notice what triggers this: not that *you* have something against your brother, but that your *brother has something against you*. You've offended him. You've wronged him. You've sinned against him. He's the one holding the grievance.

This makes it even more uncomfortable. It's not about you feeling good about reconciling. It's about you taking responsibility for the harm you've caused, whether you feel like it or not, whether it was intentional or not, whether you think it's a big deal or not.

If your brother has something against you—if there's an unresolved offense, a broken relationship, an unhealed wound that you contributed to—that takes priority over your worship.

The Greek word translated "first" is *prōton*—firstly, before, in the first place. It's a word of absolute priority. This isn't one option among many. This isn't a suggestion for when it's convenient. This is the first thing that must happen before worship can be genuine.

And the word for "reconciled" is *diallagēthi*—to be changed from enmity to friendship, to make peace, to restore relationship. It's not about just saying "sorry" and moving on. It's about actual restoration. Actual reconciliation. Actual repair of what was broken.

Only then—*tote*, at that time, subsequently—can you come and present your offering. Only after reconciliation is worship acceptable to God.

Why? Because worship from an unreconciled heart is hypocrisy. It's pretending to love God while refusing to love the person He created in His image. It's claiming devotion to an invisible God while destroying relationship with a visible brother.

And God sees right through it.

What We Put First Instead

The Bible is filled with examples of people who tried to worship God while refusing to reconcile with others. People who put their religious activity, their mission, their sense of justice ahead of actual relationship and reconciliation.

Cain: Offering Without Heart Reconciliation

The first act of worship recorded after the Fall is also the first worship God rejects:

"So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell" (Genesis 4:3-5, NASB).

Why did God reject Cain's offering? The text doesn't explicitly say, but Hebrews 11:4 gives us a clue: "By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks" (NASB).

Abel offered by faith. Cain did not. Abel's heart was right. Cain's was not.

And we see the evidence immediately in how Cain responds to God's rejection. Watch what God does:

"Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it'" (Genesis 4:6-7, NASB).

God gives Cain an opportunity. A warning. A path forward. "If you do well..." There's still time to make this right. There's still opportunity to address the sin crouching at the door.

But instead of dealing with his own heart, instead of reconciling with God and with his brother, Cain lets resentment fester:

"Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him" (Genesis 4:8, NASB).

Cain brought an offering to God while harboring murder in his heart toward his brother. He went through the motions of worship while nurturing resentment, jealousy, and rage.

His offering was unacceptable not because of what he brought but because of who he was when he brought it. His heart was unreconciled—with God and with his brother. And worship from an unreconciled heart is not worship at all.

How many of us are doing the same thing? We show up to church on Sunday with rage in our hearts toward someone who wronged us. We lift our hands in worship while refusing to speak to the person sitting three rows back. We give our tithes while withholding forgiveness. We sing about God's love while harboring bitterness toward our brother.

We're Cain at the altar, going through religious motions while our hearts are filled with unreconciled conflict. And we wonder why our worship feels empty, why our prayers bounce off the ceiling, why we can't seem to connect with God.

It's because we're trying to worship with a Cain heart. And God has no regard for such offerings.

Jonah: Mission Over Mercy

Jonah is one of the most successful prophets in Scripture—and one of the most miserable. God sends him to Nineveh to preach repentance, and the entire city responds. The king repents. The people fast and pray. God relents from the disaster He planned.

It's the greatest revival in biblical history.

And Jonah is furious about it.

"But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, 'Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life'" (Jonah 4:1-3, NASB).

Read that prayer carefully. Jonah is angry at God for being gracious. He's upset that God is compassionate. He's disappointed that God relented from judgment.

Why? Because Jonah had no love for the Ninevites. They were Israel's enemies. They were brutal oppressors. They deserved destruction. And Jonah wanted to watch them burn.

He was willing to preach. He was willing to complete the mission. He was willing to do the religious work. But he was completely unwilling to extend mercy to people he despised.

Jonah put mission over mercy. He put religious duty over actual love for the people he was serving. He was willing to be God's prophet without having God's heart.

And God's response is instructive. He doesn't praise Jonah for his successful ministry. He doesn't celebrate the revival. Instead, He confronts Jonah's loveless heart:

"Then the Lord said, 'You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?'" (Jonah 4:10-11, NASB).

You care about a plant, but I should care about 120,000 people? You're upset about shade, but I should ignore human souls?

Jonah was unreconciled in his heart toward the very people God sent him to serve. And his ministry, successful as it was by external measures, was tainted by his lack of love.

How many pastors, missionaries, ministry leaders are doing the same thing today? Preaching grace while withholding it from people they don't like. Proclaiming God's love while harboring contempt for certain groups. Doing the work of ministry while refusing to do the work of reconciliation in their own hearts.

We put mission over mercy. We put ministry activity over actual love for people. We think God is pleased with our religious productivity while He's grieved by our loveless hearts.

James and John: Judgment Over Relationship

The sons of Zebedee, nicknamed by Jesus "Sons of Thunder," lived up to their name in Luke 9:

"When His disciples James and John saw this, they said, 'Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But He turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.' And they went on to another village" (Luke 9:54-56, NASB).

The context: Jesus and the disciples are traveling through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem. A Samaritan village refuses to receive them because Jesus is heading to Jerusalem (Jews and Samaritans had a centuries-long conflict).

James and John's response? Call down fire from heaven and destroy them all. Elijah did it (2 Kings 1:10-12), so why can't we?

They wanted judgment. Destruction. Divine retribution against people who rejected their Master.

And Jesus rebukes them sharply: "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of."

You think you're defending My honor. You think you're being zealous for God. But you're actually operating in a completely wrong spirit. You're putting judgment ahead of relationship. Destruction ahead of reconciliation. Religious zeal ahead of mercy.

The Son of Man didn't come to destroy. He came to save.

James and John wanted to be right. They wanted justice. They wanted vindication. They wanted to punish those who rejected Jesus.

But Jesus wanted reconciliation. Mercy. Another chance. He wanted to go to another village and give more people opportunity to respond.

How often do we do this? Someone wrongs us, rejects us, opposes us, and our first instinct is judgment, not reconciliation. We want them to pay. We want them to suffer consequences. We want God to vindicate us and punish them.

We put being right ahead of relationship. We put justice (as we define it) ahead of mercy. We put judgment ahead of reconciliation.

And Jesus rebukes us the same way He rebuked James and John: You don't know what spirit you're operating in.

Why Jesus Prioritizes Reconciliation

Jesus's command to be reconciled first isn't arbitrary. It flows from the very nature of God and the gospel itself. There are deep theological and practical reasons why reconciliation must come before religious activity.

Relationships Reflect Our Relationship with God

John makes this connection explicit in his first epistle:

"If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:20-21, NASB).

It's impossible to love an invisible God while hating a visible person. The claim doesn't match the reality. If you can't love the person you can see, you don't actually love the God you can't see.

This is why unreconciled relationships invalidate our worship. Because worship is the expression of love for God. And if we don't love our brother, we don't actually love God—no matter what we claim, no matter how emotional our worship feels, no matter how generous our offering is.

Our horizontal relationships are the proving ground for our vertical relationship. How we treat people reveals what we actually believe about God.

If we believe God is gracious, we'll be gracious. If we believe God is forgiving, we'll forgive. If we believe God is reconciling, we'll reconcile. If we believe God loves us unconditionally, we'll love others sacrificially.

But if we harbor bitterness, refuse forgiveness, and maintain broken relationships, we reveal that we don't actually believe the gospel we claim to believe.

C.S. Lewis captures this perfectly: "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."

God forgave what was inexcusable in you. Your sin wasn't small or understandable or easy to overlook. It was cosmic treason. It was rebellion against infinite love. It deserved eternal judgment.

And God forgave it. Completely. Freely. At the cost of His Son.

Now you're commanded to forgive others. Not because their sin against you is small—it might be enormous. Not because they deserve it—they don't. But because you've been forgiven something infinitely greater.

When you refuse to reconcile, when you withhold forgiveness, when you maintain broken relationships, you're saying: "What they did to me is worse than what I did to God. Their sin against me is less forgivable than my sin against Him."

And that's simply not true.

Worship Is Meaningless Without Reconciliation

God doesn't want your offerings if your heart is unreconciled. He doesn't want your religious activity if your relationships are broken. He doesn't want your worship if you're refusing to love your brother.

This theme runs throughout Scripture. The prophets hammer it repeatedly:

"What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" Says the Lord. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle; And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats... Bring your worthless offerings no longer, Incense is an abomination to Me... I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly... So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:11-17, NASB).

God is saying: I don't want your religious performances. I don't want your worship services, your prayers, your offerings, your solemn assemblies—not while you're oppressing people, not while your hands are covered with blood, not while you're ignoring justice and refusing to defend the vulnerable.

Make yourselves clean. Fix your relationships. Seek justice. Care for people. *Then* we'll talk about worship.

Or Micah 6:6-8:

"With what shall I come to the Lord And bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, With yearling calves? Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?" (NASB).

What does God actually want? Not more sacrifice. Not more religious activity. Justice. Kindness. Humility.

Treat people right. Love mercy. Walk in humility.

Worship disconnected from right relationships is not worship. It's religious performance. And God has no interest in it.

Love for God Is Proven Through Love for Others

Jesus makes this connection in the greatest commandment passage:

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40, NASB).

Notice: the second commandment is "like" the first. They're inseparable. Connected. You can't do one without the other.

You can't love God with all your heart while hating your neighbor. You can't fulfill the first commandment while violating the second. They're two sides of the same coin.

And Jesus says the entire Law and the Prophets hang on these two. Everything else in Scripture flows from love for God and love for people. Everything.

So when you refuse to reconcile with your brother, you're not just violating a relational principle. You're violating the core of what God requires. You're failing at the most fundamental command.

Paul reinforces this in 1 Corinthians 13, the great love chapter:

"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, NASB).

You can speak in tongues, prophesy, have knowledge, exercise faith, give everything away, even die as a martyr—but without love, it's all worthless. Noise. Nothing. Unprofitable.

Religious activity without love is empty. Worship without reconciliation is meaningless. Offerings without relationship are rejected.

God wants your heart, not just your performance. And your heart is revealed by how you treat people, especially people you've offended or who have offended you.

The Cost and Grace of Reconciliation

A.W. Tozer wrote: "We are not diplomats but prophets, and our message is not a compromise but an ultimatum."

There's a tension here that we must hold. On one hand, reconciliation is not about compromising truth or enabling sin or pretending everything is fine when it's not. We're prophets, not diplomats.

On the other hand, reconciliation is about extending the same grace we've received, pursuing peace with the same urgency God pursued peace with us, and loving others the way God has loved us.

Reconciliation doesn't mean:

- Pretending the offense didn't happen
- Excusing sinful behavior
- Enabling destructive patterns
- Immediately restoring trust that was broken
- Returning to an abusive relationship

Reconciliation does mean:

- Taking responsibility for your part in the conflict
- Extending forgiveness even when it's not deserved
- Pursuing peace as far as it depends on you (Romans 12:18)
- Being willing to have the hard conversation
- Releasing bitterness and the desire for revenge

Sometimes reconciliation means full restoration of relationship. Sometimes it means offering forgiveness while maintaining healthy boundaries. Sometimes it means you've done everything you can on your end, and the other person refuses to reconcile.

But it always means you've dealt with your own heart first. You've removed the log from your own eye. You've taken responsibility for your contribution to the conflict. You've extended the grace you've received.

And only then—only after you've pursued reconciliation as far as you're able—can you worship with a clear conscience.

The Way Forward: First Be Reconciled Today

So how do we actually live this out? How do we prioritize reconciliation the way Jesus commands?

Identify Unreconciled Relationships

The first step is simply acknowledging where reconciliation is needed. Ask yourself:

- Who has something against me?
- What relationship in my life is broken or strained?
- What offense have I committed that I've never made right?
- Who have I wounded that I've never asked forgiveness from?

- What conflict am I avoiding that needs to be addressed?

Don't rationalize. Don't minimize. Don't convince yourself it's not that big a deal or that too much time has passed or that they're mostly at fault anyway.

If the Holy Spirit brings someone to mind, that's your answer. That's the person you need to be reconciled with before your worship is acceptable.

Go, Don't Wait

Jesus says "go." Not "think about going." Not "wait until it's convenient." Not "plan to address it someday."

Go. Make the phone call. Send the email. Have the conversation. Schedule the meeting.

Don't wait for them to come to you. Don't wait for the perfect time. Don't wait until you feel ready.

If you've wronged them, you go to them. That's your responsibility. That's what Jesus commands.

Take Responsibility Without Qualification

When you go, don't explain yourself into innocence. Don't say, "I'm sorry, but..." Don't shift blame. Don't make excuses.

Just own your part. "I was wrong. I hurt you. I sinned against you. Will you forgive me?"

Even if you were only 20% at fault, own that 20%. Even if they were worse, own your part. Even if you didn't intend to hurt them, own the fact that you did.

Take responsibility fully, clearly, without qualification.

Extend Forgiveness Regardless of Response

Here's the hard part: they might not forgive you. They might not want reconciliation. They might reject your attempt to make things right.

And you still have to forgive them.

Reconciliation requires two people. Forgiveness requires one. You can control your forgiveness. You can't control their response.

So you extend forgiveness whether they receive it or not. You release bitterness whether they repent or not. You let go of the desire for revenge whether they acknowledge their wrong or not.

Because you've been forgiven. And you forgive others out of the overflow of grace you've received.

Make Restitution Where Possible

Sometimes reconciliation requires more than just words. Sometimes it requires action.

If you stole, return what you took. If you slandered, set the record straight. If you damaged something, repair or replace it.

Zacchaeus understood this: "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much" (Luke 19:8, NASB).

That's repentance with hands and feet. That's reconciliation that costs something.

Don't just say you're sorry. Make it right where possible.

Worship Only After Reconciliation

Only after you've done everything in your power to reconcile should you return to the altar. Only after you've pursued peace, extended forgiveness, and taken responsibility should you resume your worship.

And when you do, your worship will be different. Deeper. More authentic. Because it's flowing from a heart that's been reconciled—with God and with others.

The Gospel Pattern

Here's the beautiful truth: reconciliation is at the very heart of the gospel.

"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:17-19, NASB).

God reconciled us to Himself through Christ. While we were enemies, while we were hostile, while we were offensive and rebellious, God pursued reconciliation. At infinite cost. Through the death of His Son.

And now we've been given the ministry of reconciliation. We're ambassadors of a reconciling God. We're agents of peace in a world of broken relationships.

How can we claim to represent a reconciling God while refusing to reconcile with our brother? How can we proclaim a gospel of peace while maintaining relationships of hostility?

We can't. Not with integrity. Not with authenticity. Not without hypocrisy.

So Jesus commands: First be reconciled. Before you worship. Before you preach. Before you serve. Before you do anything religious.

First make peace with your brother. Because a God of reconciliation will not receive worship from an unreconciling heart.

Leave your offering. Go. Make it right.

Then come back and worship. And when you do, you'll discover that reconciliation with your brother has deepened your reconciliation with God.

Because they were never separate in the first place.

"Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering."

– Matthew 5:23-24, NASB

PART TWO: LOVE FIRST

Chapter 4: The First and Greatest Commandment

Matthew 22:34-40

The Question Designed to Trap

The religious leaders have been trying to trap Jesus all day. The Pharisees sent their disciples with the Herodians to ask about paying taxes to Caesar—a question designed to turn either the Romans or the Jews against Him. Jesus answered so brilliantly they were amazed and walked away.

Then the Sadducees, who don't believe in resurrection, asked Him a ridiculous hypothetical about a woman married to seven brothers—whose wife would she be in the resurrection? Jesus exposed their ignorance of both Scripture and God's power. They were silenced.

Now the Pharisees regroup for one more attempt:

"But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?'" (Matthew 22:34-35, NASB).

It's a trap question. The rabbis had identified 613 commandments in the Torah—248 positive commands and 365 negative ones. They spent endless hours debating which were "heavy" (important) and which were "light" (less important). Some said all were equally binding. Others created elaborate hierarchies.

The lawyer is asking Jesus to wade into this theological minefield. Whatever He answers, someone will disagree. If He elevates one commandment, He can be accused of diminishing others. If He refuses to answer, He appears to dodge the question.

But Jesus doesn't hesitate. He doesn't equivocate. He doesn't give a politically safe answer that offends no one.

Instead, He cuts through centuries of rabbinic debate and gets straight to the heart of everything:

"And He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40, NASB).

Mark's account preserves more of Jesus's answer, including the context from Deuteronomy 6:

"Jesus answered, 'The foremost is, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength'" (Mark 12:29-30, NASB).

Notice what Jesus does. He doesn't just give a command. He gives *the* command. The great and foremost one. The one everything else hangs on. The one that, if you get it right, orients everything else correctly. The one that, if you get it wrong, makes everything else wrong too.

And what is that command?

Love the Lord your God. With everything. Completely. Totally. Without reservation or division or holding anything back.

All your heart. All your soul. All your mind. All your strength.

Not most of it. Not the leftover parts after you've attended to other priorities. Not the convenient portions you're comfortable giving.

All.

The Meaning of Total Love

Let's break down what Jesus is actually commanding here, because we can read these words so many times that they lose their edge, their demand, their revolutionary nature.

"You Shall Love the Lord Your God"

First, this is a command, not a suggestion. The Greek word is *agapaō*—to love, to have affection for, to be well-pleased with. But notice: it's in the imperative mood. This is not "you might want to consider loving God" or "it would be nice if you loved God." This is "you *shall* love God."

Love as a command sounds strange to modern ears. We think of love as a feeling, an emotion, something that happens to us rather than something we choose. We "fall in love." We "can't help" who we love. Love is spontaneous, uncontrollable, beyond our will.

But biblical love is fundamentally an act of will, a choice, a decision to orient your entire being toward someone. Yes, it involves emotion—but emotion follows commitment, not the other way around.

You are commanded to love God. Not to wait until you feel like it. Not to work up the emotion first. You are to set your will, your mind, your heart toward loving Him. The feelings will follow the decision.

"With All Your Heart"

The heart (*kardia*) in biblical understanding is the center of your inner life—your will, emotions, thoughts, and desires. It's the core of who you are. The seat of decision-making and affection.

To love God with all your heart means He gets the central place in your affections. He is your primary love, your deepest desire, your ultimate treasure. Everything else you love flows from and is measured against your love for Him.

Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21, NASB). What you treasure reveals what you love. What you love most determines the direction of your life.

Loving God with all your heart means no divided loyalties. No competing affections. No rival treasures. He doesn't share first place with anyone or anything.

This doesn't mean you don't love other things or people. It means everything else you love is ordered properly in relation to your love for God. Your spouse, children, friends, work, hobbies—all are loved rightly when God is loved first and supremely.

"With All Your Soul"

The soul (*psychē*) is your very life, your essential self, your being. To love God with all your soul means you give Him your entire existence. Your life belongs to Him. Your identity is found in Him. Your purpose flows from Him.

This is life-or-death devotion. Jesus uses this word when He says, "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it" (Matthew 16:25, NASB). The word translated "life" is *psychē*—soul.

Loving God with all your soul means you're willing to lose your life for Him because your life is already His. You don't hold anything back, not even your physical existence, because you belong entirely to Him.

"With All Your Mind"

The mind (*dianoia*) is your intellect, understanding, reasoning capacity. To love God with all your mind means you give Him your thoughts, your mental energy, your intellectual devotion.

This is not anti-intellectual Christianity. This is the call to bring every thought captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). To think God's thoughts after Him. To study His Word. To understand His ways. To meditate on His character.

Loving God with all your mind means you don't park your brain at the door when you come to faith. You use your God-given intellect to know Him more deeply, love Him more fully, serve Him more effectively.

"With All Your Strength"

The strength (*ischus*) is your physical power, your energy, your capacity for action. To love God with all your strength means you give Him your body, your work, your service, your activity.

This is hands-and-feet love. Love that shows up. Love that serves. Love that acts. Your physical body becomes an instrument of worship and service to the God you love.

Paul says, "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Romans 12:1, NASB).

Your body is not your own—it's been bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). So you use every ounce of physical strength you have in service to the One who redeemed you.

The Totality of the Command

Here's what Jesus is saying: Love God with *everything you are and everything you have*.

Heart—the center of affection.

Soul—the essence of existence.

Mind—the power of intellect.

Strength—the capacity for action.

Internal and external. Emotional and intellectual. Spiritual and physical. Private and public. Hidden and visible.

All of it. Every part. Nothing held back. Nothing reserved. Nothing exempted.

This is total devotion. Complete surrender. Absolute love.

And Jesus says this is not one commandment among many. This is "the great and foremost commandment." The one all others hang on. The one that, if obeyed, makes everything else fall into place.

What We Put First Instead

The tragedy of the human condition is that we're designed to love God supremely, but we're constantly putting other loves in first place. We're engineered for total devotion to our Creator, but we give that devotion to created things instead.

Scripture gives us stark examples of people who put other loves first—and the destruction that followed.

The Rich Fool: Self-Love and Security First

Jesus tells a parable in Luke 12 that cuts to the heart of misplaced love:

"The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:16-21, NASB).

Count how many times this man says "I" or "my": I will tear down *my* barns... I will build... I will store all *my* grain and *my* goods... I will say to *my* soul... *my* soul has many goods...

It's all about him. His security. His comfort. His future. His pleasure.

Notice who's not mentioned in his entire internal monologue: God.

This man loved himself first. He loved security first. He loved his possessions first. And he thought he had "many years to come" to enjoy them.

God calls him a fool. Not because he was successful. Not because he was prudent enough to save. Not because he worked hard.

He's a fool because he was "not rich toward God." He stored up treasure for himself while bankrupting himself spiritually. He had all his heart, soul, mind, and strength invested in earthly security while giving nothing to God.

And that very night, his soul was required of him. All his accumulation, all his planning, all his security—worthless. He had loved the wrong thing first. And he died a spiritual pauper despite being materially wealthy.

How many of us are living the same way? We pour all our heart into building careers. All our soul into accumulating wealth. All our mind into planning for retirement. All our strength into achieving financial security.

And we give God the leftovers. The scraps. The moments we can spare after we've attended to everything we actually care about.

We love ourselves first. We love security first. We love the world's definition of success first. And we wonder why our souls feel empty even as our bank accounts fill up.

Jesus says, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26, NASB).

The rich fool gained the world—or at least a significant portion of it. And he forfeited his soul. He loved everything first except the One who mattered most.

The Pharisees: Tradition Over Relationship First

The Pharisees were experts at keeping commandments. They had systems, rituals, traditions designed to ensure they didn't violate God's Law. They built fences around the Torah—extra rules to keep them far from even approaching sin.

And in the process, they completely missed the heart of what God wanted.

Jesus confronts them in Matthew 15:

"Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.' And He answered and said to them, 'Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?'" (Matthew 15:1-3, NASB).

Then Jesus gives a specific example:

"For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, 'Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,' he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matthew 15:4-6, NASB).

Here's what was happening: If someone declared their money as "corban"—dedicated to God—they could keep it for themselves rather than use it to care for their aging parents. They used religious tradition to circumvent the clear command to honor father and mother.

They loved their tradition more than they loved God. They loved their religious system more than they loved the people God commanded them to care for.

Jesus exposes the heart issue by quoting Isaiah:

"This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (Matthew 15:8-9, NASB).

They had all the external appearance of loving God. They said the right words. They performed the right rituals. They kept the traditions meticulously.

But their hearts were far from Him. Their worship was in vain. They had substituted human traditions for divine relationship.

This is the danger of religion without relationship. You can keep all the rules and miss the heart of the Lawgiver. You can perform all the rituals and never actually love the One the rituals were designed to honor.

The Pharisees put tradition first. System first. Religious performance first. And they thought this made them close to God.

But Jesus says their hearts were far from Him. Because love for God must come first—before tradition, before system, before any religious activity.

How many Christians today are modern Pharisees? We have our traditions, our preferences, our "this is how we've always done it." We're more concerned with maintaining our religious systems than pursuing actual relationship with God.

We love our worship style more than we love worshiping. We love our theological tribe more than we love theological truth. We love our denominational distinctives more than we love Jesus.

We honor God with our lips while our hearts are far from Him. And we think our religious activity proves our devotion.

Demas: Love of the Present World First

Paul's brief mention of Demas in 2 Timothy reveals a tragic progression:

"Make every effort to come to me soon; for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Tarshish" (2 Timothy 4:9-10, NASB).

Demas had been Paul's fellow worker (Colossians 4:14, Philemon 1:24). He was part of the inner circle. He was in ministry. He was serving alongside the great apostle.

And he walked away. Why? Because he "loved this present world."

The Greek word for "loved" is *agapaō*—the same word used for loving God. Demas had *agapē* love—the highest form of love, the committed, devoted, whole-hearted love—but he had directed it toward the wrong object.

He loved this present world. Not God. Not Christ. Not the gospel. Not eternal things. The world. The temporal. The passing. The here and now.

And that love drove him away from Paul, away from ministry, away from the faith.

We don't know what specific aspect of "this present world" Demas loved. Money? Comfort? Pleasure? Security? Reputation? We only know that when forced to choose between Christ and the world, he chose the world.

He put love of present things first. And he lost everything eternal.

John warns about this exact danger:

"Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:15-17, NASB).

Love for the world and love for the Father are mutually exclusive. You can't love both supremely. One will win. One will be first.

Demas chose the world. And he became a cautionary tale about divided loyalties, misplaced love, and tragic defection.

How many people start well in their faith journey only to be seduced by love of this present world? They begin with passion for God, then gradually their affections shift to career, comfort, pleasure, approval, success—the things of this passing world.

And one day they wake up and realize they've loved the wrong things first. They've given their heart, soul, mind, and strength to temporary treasures while neglecting the eternal treasure.

Why Jesus Prioritizes Total Love for God

These three examples—the rich fool, the Pharisees, and Demas—reveal three of the most common substitutes for supreme love of God: self and security, religion and tradition, and the world and its pleasures.

And all three end in tragedy. The rich fool loses his soul. The Pharisees become blind guides leading people away from God. Demas deserts the faith.

Why? Because anything other than God in first place will eventually destroy you.

Jesus prioritizes total love for God because it's the only foundation that can bear the weight of human existence.

Love for God Is the Foundation of All Other Loves

J.I. Packer writes: "God's chief purpose for creating us is that we might love Him, and in loving Him, find our highest happiness."

You were created to love God. That's your design. Your purpose. Your reason for existing. And when you love Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, everything else in your life finds its proper place.

When God is loved first and supremely, you can love your spouse rightly—not as an idol or as your source of ultimate satisfaction, but as a gift from God to be cherished and served.

When God is loved first, you can love your children rightly—not as extensions of yourself or as your legacy project, but as image-bearers entrusted to your care.

When God is loved first, you can love your work rightly—not as your identity or your means of proving worth, but as a way to serve God and others.

When God is loved first, you can love money rightly—not as security or as master, but as a tool to be stewarded for kingdom purposes.

But when anything else is loved first—when anything else takes the supreme position that belongs to God alone—all your other loves become disordered, distorted, destructive.

Love your spouse more than God, and you'll turn them into an idol who can never live up to the burden of being your ultimate source of happiness.

Love your children more than God, and you'll smother them with expectations they were never meant to carry.

Love your work more than God, and you'll sacrifice everything that matters on the altar of achievement.

Love money more than God, and you'll discover that it makes a terrible master and a cruel god.

Augustine famously prayed, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

We're designed to love God first. When we do, our hearts rest. When we don't, our hearts remain restless—chasing after substitutes that can never satisfy, loving created things with the devotion meant only for the Creator.

Total Devotion Prevents Idolatry

The first commandment of the Ten Commandments is: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3, NASB).

The second is: "You shall not make for yourself an idol" (Exodus 20:4, NASB).

Then God says: "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5, NASB).

God is jealous. Not in the petty, insecure human sense. But in the righteous sense of demanding exclusive worship because He alone is worthy of it.

When you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, there's no room left for idols. Total devotion to God crowds out devotion to anything else.

Idolatry isn't just bowing to carved images. It's giving to anything or anyone the love, worship, trust, and devotion that belongs to God alone.

Your bank account can be an idol. Your reputation can be an idol. Your children can be an idol. Your ministry can be an idol. Your political ideology can be an idol. Your comfort can be an idol.

Anything you love more than God. Anything you trust more than God. Anything you fear losing more than you fear losing God. Anything you'll sin to obtain or maintain. That's your functional god. Your idol.

And God will not share your heart with idols.

Tim Keller writes: "An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, 'If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure.'"

When God is loved first and completely, you don't need those things to feel meaningful, valuable, significant, or secure. You have all of that in Him. The idols lose their power because your heart is already fully occupied with love for the true God.

Heart Orientation Determines Life Direction

Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21, NASB).

And: "The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil" (Matthew 12:35, NASB).

Your treasure—what you love most—determines the direction of your entire life. Your heart orientation determines your life trajectory.

If you love God first, your life will move toward Him. Your decisions will be made with His glory in view. Your resources will be deployed for His kingdom. Your relationships will be shaped by His love. Your time will be spent in His service. Your thoughts will be captivated by His truth.

But if you love something else first—yourself, money, comfort, success, approval—your life will move toward that thing. And since none of those things are worthy of ultimate devotion, you'll end up somewhere you never intended to be.

Charles Spurgeon understood this: "The greatest enemy to human souls is the self-righteous spirit which makes men look to themselves for salvation."

When you look to yourself first—when self-love is supreme—you inevitably drift toward self-righteousness, self-sufficiency, self-promotion. You become the center of your own universe. And a universe with you at the center is far too small.

But when you love God first, you find yourself drawn out of yourself and into His greatness. Your universe expands to include His purposes, His glory, His kingdom. You discover that life isn't about you at all—and that's liberating, not limiting.

The Way Forward: Loving God First Today

So how do we actually obey this greatest commandment? How do we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength when our hearts are so easily divided, our souls so easily distracted, our minds so easily captured by lesser things?

Recognize That Love Requires a Decision

First, we must understand that love is not primarily a feeling we wait to have. It's a decision we make and remake constantly.

Decide right now: God will be first. In your affections. In your allegiance. In your attention. In your resources. In your time. In your thoughts.

This isn't about manufacturing emotion. It's about setting your will. And when your will is set toward loving God, the emotions will follow. The desire will grow. The affection will deepen.

But it starts with a decision.

Feed Your Love for God

Love grows through relationship. You love God more as you know Him more. You know Him more as you spend time with Him.

This means you must prioritize:

Time in His Word. You can't love someone you don't know. God reveals Himself through Scripture. As you read, study, meditate on His Word, you encounter His character, His heart, His ways. And as you encounter Him, you love Him more.

Time in Prayer. Prayer is conversation with God. It's intimacy. Communion. As you talk to Him, listen to Him, pour out your heart to Him, your love deepens.

Time in Worship. Both corporate and private worship train your heart to treasure God above all else. As you sing His praises, declare His worth, focus your attention on His glory, you're rehearsing the truth of who He is and reminding your wandering heart where its true home is.

Examine Your Treasures

Where is your treasure actually invested? What do you think about most? What do you spend money on most freely? What do you make time for without having to schedule it? Where does your mind go in quiet moments?

That's where your treasure is. And where your treasure is, your heart is also.

If your treasure is primarily in earthly things—possessions, reputation, comfort, success—your heart is there too. And you're not loving God first.

Ruthlessly examine what you treasure. Then realign. Divest from earthly treasures. Invest in eternal ones.

Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal" (Matthew 6:19-20, NASB).

Practice Loving God in Everything

Loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength isn't about adding religious activities to your schedule. It's about bringing a God-first orientation to *everything* you already do.

Work? Do it as unto the Lord, not unto men (Colossians 3:23).

Eat and drink? Do it all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Rest? Receive it as a gift from the God who cares for you.

Serve? Do it out of love for the One who served you.

Give? Give because you love the generous God who gave you everything.

Every activity becomes an act of love for God when it's oriented toward Him, done for His glory, received from His hand.

Confess Your Divided Loves

You will fail at this. Regularly. Your heart will wander. You'll love lesser things more than you love God. You'll serve other masters. You'll treasure earthly things.

When you realize this, confess it. Quickly. Specifically. "God, I loved my reputation more than You. I loved comfort more than You. I loved being right more than You. Forgive me. Reorient my heart toward You."

And receive His grace. Because God doesn't demand perfect love before receiving you. He transforms your love as you walk with Him.

Pray for Greater Love

Finally, pray that God would increase your love for Him. Ask the Holy Spirit to pour out the love of God into your heart (Romans 5:5). Beg God to captivate your affections, to make Himself irresistible to you, to draw you into deeper love.

This is a prayer God delights to answer. Because He wants your wholehearted love even more than you want to give it.

The Greatest Commandment, The Greatest Love

When the lawyer asked Jesus about the greatest commandment, he probably expected a debate. An argument. A display of theological brilliance.

Instead, he got something far simpler and far more demanding: Love God. Completely. Totally. With everything you are and everything you have.

This is the great and foremost commandment. Not because God is needy and requires our love to feel validated. But because we were created to love Him, and we will never be whole, never be satisfied, never be fully human until we're loving the One we were designed to love.

Everything else—every other commandment, every other priority, every other pursuit—depends on getting this one right. Love God first. Love God most. Love God with all.

And when you do, you'll discover what J.I. Packer described: that in loving Him, you find your highest happiness.

Not because happiness is the goal. But because God is so infinitely worthy of love, so abundantly generous in His love, that loving Him supremely produces joy supremely.

The rich fool looked for happiness in accumulation. He found death.
The Pharisees looked for happiness in religion. They found emptiness.
Demas looked for happiness in the world. He found desertion and loss.

But those who love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength—they find life. Real life. Abundant life. Eternal life.

Because in the end, loving God first isn't about obligation or duty or religious performance.

It's about coming home to the only love that will never disappoint, never fail, never leave you empty.

It's about giving your whole heart to the only One who is worthy of it and who will treasure it forever.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the great and foremost commandment.

– Matthew 22:37-38, NASB

Chapter 5: Love One Another First

John 13:34-35

The Night Everything Changed

It's Thursday night. The Passover meal. Jesus and His twelve disciples are gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem. The atmosphere is heavy with unspoken tension. Jesus knows what's coming—the betrayal, the arrest, the crucifixion. The disciples sense something is wrong but can't quite grasp it.

And then Jesus does something that shocks them all. He gets up from the table, wraps a towel around His waist, pours water into a basin, and begins washing their feet.

This is the work of the lowest servant. The job nobody wants. The task beneath the dignity of a rabbi, a master, a teacher. And yet here is Jesus—God in flesh—on His knees, washing the dust and grime from His disciples' feet.

Peter protests. Jesus insists. "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (John 13:8, NASB). Peter relents. Jesus washes them all—including Judas, who within hours will betray Him for thirty pieces of silver.

When Jesus finishes, He returns to His place at the table and explains what He's just done:

"Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13:12-17, NASB).

You ought to wash one another's feet. Not because it's a nice ritual to add to your religious calendar. But because this is what love looks like. Humble. Sacrificial. Getting on your knees and serving others in ways that cost you dignity, comfort, convenience.

And then Jesus gives them—gives us—what He calls a new commandment:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35, NASB).

A new commandment. Love one another. Not in some general, abstract way. But specifically, concretely, in the exact way Jesus has just demonstrated—with a towel and a basin, on your knees, serving.

And notice the standard: "even as I have loved you." Not as you feel like loving. Not as is convenient or comfortable. As Jesus loved. Which means sacrificially, unconditionally, to the point of death.

This is how people will recognize you as His disciples. Not by your theology, though theology matters. Not by your spiritual experiences, though those matter too. Not by your religious activities or your moral purity or your doctrinal precision.

They'll know you belong to Jesus by how you love one another.

What Makes This Commandment New?

Jesus calls this a "new" commandment, but the command to love wasn't new. Leviticus 19:18 had commanded, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (NASB). Jesus had already identified this as the second greatest commandment, inseparable from loving God (Matthew 22:39).

So what makes this commandment new?

The Standard Is New

"Love one another, *even as I have loved you*" (emphasis added).

The old standard was "love your neighbor as yourself"—which is already radical. But the new standard is higher, deeper, more demanding: love others the way Jesus loves you.

How does Jesus love you?

- While you were still a sinner, hostile to God, dead in your transgressions (Romans 5:8)
- Not because you deserved it, but because of His grace (Ephesians 2:8-9)
- To the point of death—the worst kind of death, crucifixion (Philippians 2:8)
- Forgiving completely, covering all your sin (Colossians 2:13-14)
- Never giving up on you, never abandoning you (Hebrews 13:5)
- Serving you, washing you, making you clean (Ephesians 5:26)

Now love *one another* that way. Love people who don't deserve it. Love people who oppose you. Love people who hurt you. Love sacrificially, at cost to yourself. Love to the point of laying down your life.

That's the new standard. And it's impossibly high—unless you've experienced that love yourself. Unless you understand how Jesus has loved you. Then, and only then, can you love others the same way.

The Scope Is New

Notice Jesus doesn't say "love everyone" here, though that's certainly implied elsewhere in Scripture. He says "love *one another*"—that is, love your fellow disciples. Love those in the community of faith. Love your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Why this specific focus?

Because the quality of love within the Christian community is the greatest apologetic for the truth of the gospel. It's the visible evidence that Jesus is real and His power is transforming.

Jesus says explicitly: "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35, NASB).

The world will know. They'll see how you love each other—across ethnic lines, economic differences, political divides, personality clashes—and they'll know something supernatural is happening. They'll know Jesus is real because only His love could create this kind of unity.

But when Christians fail to love one another, when the church is marked by division, gossip, competition, and hostility—we become a counter-witness. We tell the world that Jesus isn't real, or at least that His power isn't sufficient to create the love He commanded.

The Motivation Is New

The old command to love your neighbor came with the authority of God's law. You obey because God commands it.

But this new command comes in the context of Jesus's love demonstrated in real time. He's washing their feet. He's about to go to the cross. The motivation isn't just "God says so." The motivation is "Look at what I've done for you. Now go and do likewise."

John picks up this theme in his first epistle:

"We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God

whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:19-21, NASB).

The logic is simple and devastating: If you claim to love God but hate your brother, you're lying. Because love for God flows into love for others. If the vertical love (to God) is real, it will produce horizontal love (to people). If it doesn't, the vertical love isn't real either.

We love because He first loved us. Love is a response, not an initiation. You've been loved by Jesus—incomprehensibly, sacrificially, eternally. Now that love overflows from you to others.

If it doesn't overflow, you haven't actually received it. Not really. Not in a way that transformed you.

What We Put First Instead

The command to love one another seems straightforward. And yet Christians throughout history—and today—consistently put other things first instead of love.

The Priest and Levite: Religious Duty Over Compassion

Jesus tells a parable in response to the question "Who is my neighbor?" The story of the Good Samaritan reveals what we put first when love isn't first.

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side" (Luke 10:30-32, NASB).

A priest and a Levite—religious professionals, the spiritual leaders of Israel—both see the wounded man and both deliberately avoid him. They pass by on the other side.

Why?

The text doesn't tell us their reasoning, but we can infer. If they touched a dead body (or someone who might be dead), they would become ceremonially unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:11). They couldn't perform their temple duties. They couldn't fulfill their religious obligations.

So they made a calculation: Religious duty is more important than compassion for this suffering man. Being ritually clean is more important than getting messy helping someone in need. Maintaining their ability to serve at the temple is more important than serving this person on the road.

They put religious duty first. Compassion came second—or not at all.

Meanwhile, a Samaritan—a half-breed heretic from the Jews' perspective, someone with bad theology and wrong worship practices—stops, shows compassion, binds up the man's wounds, takes him to an inn, pays for his care, and promises to cover any additional expenses.

The one with the "right" theology and the "right" religious credentials failed to love. The one the Jews considered religiously compromised demonstrated actual love.

Jesus's point is sharp: Your religious activity means nothing if you won't stop to help the person bleeding by the side of the road. Your theology is worthless if it doesn't produce compassion. Your worship is empty if you'll pass by suffering people to maintain your ritual purity.

How many Christians today are making the same choice? We're so busy with church activities, ministry programs, religious duties, and spiritual disciplines that we have no time or energy left for actual people who need help.

We'll serve on a committee but won't visit a lonely neighbor. We'll attend a Bible study but won't help a struggling single mom. We'll go on a mission trip overseas but ignore the need in our own neighborhood. We'll defend doctrinal purity but show no compassion to the doctrinally confused.

We've put religious duty first. And like the priest and Levite, we pass by on the other side while congratulating ourselves on our spiritual devotion.

The Disciples: Personal Ambition Over Serving Others

The disciples struggled constantly with this priority problem. Even after walking with Jesus for years, observing His humility and service, they still put personal ambition before love for one another.

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, 'Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven'" (Matthew 18:1-3, NASB).

They're arguing about greatness. About rank. About who's most important. About the hierarchy of disciples.

This is the opposite of love. Love seeks the good of others. Ambition seeks the advancement of self. Love serves. Ambition competes. Love gives away position. Ambition grasps for it.

And Jesus's response is to put a child in their midst—someone with no status, no power, no achievement to boast about—and say, "Unless you become like this, you won't even enter the kingdom."

The kingdom operates on completely different principles than the world. In the world, you fight your way to the top. In the kingdom, you descend to the bottom. In the world, you promote yourself. In the kingdom, you humble yourself. In the world, you compete with others for position. In the kingdom, you serve others and let God determine your position.

Mark's account adds another detail from a similar incident:

"Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, 'If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all'" (Mark 9:35, NASB).

You want to be first? Become last. Be servant of all.

This is Jesus's leadership model. This is how you become great in God's kingdom—by serving everyone else, by putting others first, by loving rather than competing.

But the disciples kept missing it. Even at the Last Supper, even as Jesus was washing their feet, Luke records: "And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest" (Luke 22:24, NASB).

In the very moment when Jesus is demonstrating servant leadership, they're arguing about greatness. He's on His knees with a towel; they're debating who deserves the highest position.

They put personal ambition first. And it blinded them to the very love Jesus was demonstrating.

How many Christians—especially Christian leaders—are doing the same thing today? We want the positions, the titles, the platforms, the influence. We want to be recognized, respected, admired. We want our ministries to grow, our churches to be big, our names to be known.

And in the pursuit of greatness, we stop loving. We compete with other churches instead of collaborating. We protect our territory instead of serving the greater good. We promote ourselves instead of washing feet.

We've put personal ambition first. And we've missed the entire point of what it means to follow the One who "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45, NASB).

The Church at Corinth: Spiritual Gifts Over Love

The church at Corinth was blessed with extraordinary spiritual gifts. They had prophecy, tongues, words of knowledge, healings, miracles. By external measures, they looked like a spiritually powerful church.

But they were a mess. Divided. Arrogant. Immoral. Litigious. And they were using their spiritual gifts as status symbols rather than tools for serving one another.

Paul has to correct them sharply in 1 Corinthians 12-14. And right in the middle, in chapter 13, he inserts what might be the most important corrective in all of Scripture about priorities:

"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, NASB).

Read that slowly. Paul is saying you can have:

- The most impressive spiritual gifts (tongues, prophecy, knowledge)
- The most extraordinary faith (mountain-moving faith)
- The most sacrificial generosity (giving everything to the poor)
- The most dramatic martyrdom (being burned alive)

And if you don't have love, it's all worthless. Noise. Nothing. Zero profit.

You can look spiritually impressive. You can have gifts that amaze people. You can make sacrifices that inspire admiration. And if love isn't the foundation and motivation, it's all empty.

The Corinthians had put spiritual gifts first. They valued the spectacular over the substantial. They wanted the impressive displays of power but hadn't learned the basic discipline of loving one another.

So their gatherings were chaotic, their relationships were fractured, and their testimony was compromised. All their gifts couldn't compensate for their lack of love.

Paul goes on to describe what love actually looks like:

"Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, NASB).

This is the love that must come first. Not the flashy gifts. Not the impressive displays. Not the spectacular experiences. Just patient, kind, humble, self-giving love that endures all things and never fails.

How many churches today are making the same mistake as Corinth? We want the exciting gifts. We want powerful worship experiences. We want dynamic preaching. We want growing numbers. We want visible success.

But do we have love? Real love? The kind that's patient with difficult people? Kind to those who annoy us? Humble enough to prefer others? Self-giving enough to serve without recognition?

Or have we put spiritual gifts, experiences, programs, and growth metrics first while love remains an afterthought?

Why Jesus Prioritizes Love for One Another

Jesus doesn't prioritize love because it's a nice sentiment or because it makes communities feel good. He prioritizes it because love is absolutely essential to the Christian life and witness.

Love Is the Identifying Mark of Disciples

"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35, NASB).

This is how the watching world identifies genuine followers of Jesus. Not by our bumper stickers. Not by our political affiliations. Not by our worship style or our theological precision or our moral stances.

By our love for one another.

The early church understood this. The pagan philosopher Tertullian, writing in the second century, noted what non-Christians said about Christians: "See how they love one another."

They loved across ethnic lines in a world divided by ethnicity. They loved across economic classes in a world stratified by wealth. They cared for the sick, the poor, the abandoned. They shared their possessions. They died for one another.

And the world noticed. And the church grew. Not primarily through evangelistic campaigns or apologetic arguments, but through the visible demonstration of supernatural love.

When Christians genuinely love one another—when we forgive instead of holding grudges, when we serve instead of competing, when we sacrifice for instead of using each other—we create a witness that no argument can refute.

But when we fail to love—when churches split over petty disputes, when Christians gossip about one another, when we're known more for what we're against than who we're for—we destroy our witness. We tell the world that Jesus either isn't real or isn't powerful enough to transform us.

Love Demonstrates the Reality of Our Faith

John makes this connection explicitly throughout his first epistle. He returns to it again and again because it's that important:

"The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (1 John 2:9-11, NASB).

You can claim to be "in the light"—to be a Christian, to know God, to walk with Jesus. But if you hate your brother, you're actually still in darkness. You're deceived about your spiritual state.

John goes even further:

"We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:14-15, NASB).

How do you know you've passed from death to life? How do you know you're actually a Christian? Because you love other Christians.

If you don't love—if you hate your brother—you're still in death. You haven't been regenerated. You don't have eternal life.

This is sobering. Terrifying, even. John is saying that love for other believers is the evidence of genuine conversion. It's the proof that you've been born again, that the Holy Spirit lives in you, that you've truly passed from death to life.

C.S. Lewis understood this: "Christian love, either towards God or towards man, is an affair of the will."

Love isn't about having warm feelings toward everyone. It's about willing the good of others, choosing to serve them, deciding to forgive them. It's an act of the will empowered by the Spirit.

And if you claim to be a Christian but your will is consistently bent toward hatred, bitterness, revenge, or indifference toward other believers, you need to examine whether you've actually been converted.

Love Fulfills the Law

Paul writes in Romans 13:8-10:

"Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (NASB).

When you genuinely love others, you don't need thousands of rules to govern your behavior. Love fulfills all the "thou shalt nots" naturally.

If you love someone, you won't murder them. You won't commit adultery against them. You won't steal from them. You won't covet what they have. You won't lie about them. You won't harm them.

Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Therefore, love fulfills the entire law.

This is why Jesus could summarize the entire Law and Prophets in two commands: love God and love your neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40). Everything else is commentary. Everything else flows from these two.

When love is first, you don't need an exhaustive list of rules. The love itself guides you into right behavior.

But when love isn't first, you can keep all the rules and still violate the heart of what God requires. You can be technically obedient while being relationally destructive. You can be morally upright while being loveless.

And that's exactly what Jesus condemned in the Pharisees: they tithed their spices while neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23). They kept the letter of the law while missing its spirit entirely.

The Nature of the Love We're Called To

C.S. Lewis wrote: "Love is not affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person's ultimate good as far as it can be obtained."

This definition is crucial for understanding what Jesus means when He commands us to love one another.

Love isn't primarily an emotion, though emotion may accompany it. Love is a *steady wish*—a consistent, ongoing, determined desire for the other person's ultimate good.

Not their temporary comfort. Not their immediate happiness. Their *ultimate good*—what's truly best for them in light of eternity.

This means:

- Sometimes love confronts sin rather than excusing it
- Sometimes love says hard truths rather than comfortable lies
- Sometimes love disciplines rather than indulges
- Sometimes love sets boundaries rather than enables
- Sometimes love lets people experience consequences rather than rescuing them

But always, love seeks the other person's good. Always, love acts for their benefit, not yours. Always, love gives rather than takes, serves rather than uses, sacrifices rather than exploits.

And this kind of love is impossible in your own strength. You cannot manufacture it through effort or willpower. It flows from the Spirit's work in you. It's the fruit of abiding in Christ (John 15:4-5).

Which is why loving one another must come first. Not last, after you've mastered theology or achieved spiritual maturity or overcome all your own issues. First. As the evidence that you belong to Jesus and He's transforming you.

The Way Forward: Loving One Another First Today

So how do we actually obey this command? How do we make love for one another first in a world—and a church—that constantly tempts us to prioritize other things?

Receive the Love Jesus Has for You

You cannot give what you haven't received. You cannot love others with Jesus's love if you haven't first experienced His love for you.

So start here: sit with the truth that Jesus loves you. Not because you've earned it. Not because you deserve it. But because of who He is.

He loved you enough to die for you while you were still His enemy (Romans 5:8). He loves you enough to never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). He loves you enough to be preparing a place for you in His Father's house (John 14:2-3).

Let that love sink in. Meditate on it. Pray for the Holy Spirit to make it real to you. Because when you truly grasp how much you're loved, loving others becomes possible.

Identify Who You're Failing to Love

Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal where you're failing to love. Who are you avoiding? Who annoys you? Who have you written off? Who are you gossiping about? Who have you refused to forgive?

That's where the work needs to happen. That's where you need to apply Jesus's command to love one another.

Don't start with the easy people who are already easy to love. Start with the difficult ones. The ones you've put personal comfort, personal preference, or personal ambition ahead of loving.

Make Concrete Decisions to Love

Remember, love is an affair of the will. It's a decision, not just a feeling.

So make specific decisions:

- "I will forgive this person even though they haven't apologized"
- "I will serve this difficult person even though they're unappreciative"
- "I will speak well of this person even though they've spoken poorly of me"
- "I will sacrifice my preference for their benefit"
- "I will seek their good even though it costs me"

Then follow through. Even when you don't feel like it. Even when it's inconvenient. Even when they don't notice or appreciate it.

This is love as Jesus loved. Not based on feeling but on decision. Not based on worthiness but on grace.

Prioritize Actual People Over Religious Activity

If you have to choose between attending a church meeting and helping a person in need, help the person. If you have to choose between defending doctrinal precision and showing compassion to someone struggling, show compassion. If you have to choose between maintaining your spiritual routine and interrupting it to love someone, love the person.

Religious activity is good. Theology is important. Spiritual disciplines are valuable. But they're not the goal. They're the means. The goal is love—for God and for people.

Don't be the priest and Levite passing by on the other side because you're too busy with religious duties to stop and love.

Examine Your Motives

Why do you serve in ministry? Why do you want certain positions? Why do you desire influence or recognition?

If the answer is personal ambition, repent. If the answer is to be admired or appreciated, repent. If the answer is to feel important or significant, repent.

The only legitimate motive for Christian service is love—love for God that overflows into love for others. Service motivated by anything else eventually becomes toxic and self-serving.

Pursue Unity Over Being Right

You can be theologically correct and relationally destructive. You can win the argument and lose the brother.

Sometimes love means prioritizing unity over being right. Sometimes love means letting go of your position for the sake of relationship. Sometimes love means agreeing to disagree and still treating each other with dignity and grace.

This doesn't mean compromising essential doctrine. It means not making every disagreement a hill to die on. It means recognizing that in a thousand issues, love is more important than being proven right.

Practice the Specific Qualities of Love

Go back to 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 and work through the list:

Love is patient. Who are you being impatient with? Practice patience with them today.

Love is kind. Who needs your kindness? Show it, even if it's not reciprocated.

Love is not jealous. Who are you jealous of? Celebrate their success instead.

Love does not brag and is not arrogant. Where are you promoting yourself? Practice humility instead.

Love does not act unbecomingly. Where are you being rude or harsh? Apologize and change.

Love does not seek its own. Where are you being selfish? Choose sacrifice instead.

Love is not provoked. What's provoking you to anger? Choose grace instead.

Love does not take into account a wrong suffered. What offense are you keeping a record of? Forgive and let it go.

Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth. Where are you excusing sin or celebrating what's wrong? Align with truth instead.

Work through this list regularly. Let it diagnose where your love is failing and where it needs to grow.

The Badge of Discipleship

When Jesus gave this new commandment, He attached it to a promise: "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Love is the badge. The uniform. The identifying mark. Not your Bible knowledge, though that matters. Not your worship style, though that has its place. Not your moral stands, though those are important. Not your spiritual experiences, though those can be meaningful.

Your love for one another.

The world is watching. They're watching how you treat each other when you disagree. How you handle conflict. How you respond to those who wound you. How you serve those who can't repay you. How you forgive those who don't deserve it.

And based on what they see, they're deciding whether Jesus is real.

If we love one another—truly, sacrificially, consistently—they'll know we belong to Him. They'll see something supernatural at work. They'll witness a love that can only be explained by the presence of Jesus.

But if we fail to love—if we're marked by division, bitterness, competition, and hostility—we tell them Jesus is either not real or not powerful enough to change us.

The stakes couldn't be higher.

So love one another. First. Before religious duty. Before personal ambition. Before spiritual gifts. Before being right or looking good or protecting yourself.

Love.

Even as Jesus has loved you.

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

– John 13:34-35, NASB

PART THREE: REPENTANCE AND FAITH FIRST

Chapter 6: Repent First

Mark 1:14-15

The First Word of the Gospel

Jesus has been baptized by John. He's endured forty days of temptation in the wilderness. John the Baptist has been arrested. And now Jesus begins His public ministry.

What's the first word He preaches? What's the first message? What's the opening salvo of the greatest ministry the world has ever seen?

"Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15, NASB).

Repent.

Not "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Not "Come just as you are." Not "Let Me make you happy." Not even "Believe in Me."

Repent.

It's a jarring word. An offensive word. A word that assumes something is fundamentally wrong with you that needs to be corrected. A word that confronts your pride, exposes your sin, and demands a radical change of direction.

And it's the first word of the gospel. The doorway. The entrance requirement. The necessary first step.

You cannot come to Jesus without repentance. You cannot enter the kingdom without it. You cannot believe the gospel without first repenting. You cannot be saved while still holding onto the very thing you need to be saved from.

Repentance comes first. Not second. Not alongside everything else. Not eventually, after you've cleaned yourself up. First.

What Repentance Actually Means

The Greek word Jesus uses is *metanoeō*—to change one's mind, to have a change of heart, to think differently afterward. It's a compound word: *meta* (after, with) and *noeō* (to think, to perceive).

Repentance is fundamentally about a change of mind that produces a change of direction.

It's not just feeling bad about your sin. Judas felt bad—he was filled with remorse after betraying Jesus (Matthew 27:3). But remorse isn't repentance. Remorse says, "I feel terrible about what I did." Repentance says, "I was wrong, God was right, and I'm turning around."

It's not just stopping certain behaviors. The Pharisees stopped doing lots of things. They avoided all sorts of sins. But they never repented of their core sin—self-righteousness. They modified their behavior without changing their hearts.

It's not just religious reformation. King Saul offered sacrifices after disobeying God's command. He performed religious acts. But Samuel told him, "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22, NASB). Religious activity without heart repentance is worthless.

Repentance is a complete about-face. It's acknowledging that you've been going the wrong direction—away from God, in rebellion against Him, pursuing your own way—and making a 180-degree turn to go toward Him instead.

It's agreeing with God about your sin. Not explaining it. Not minimizing it. Not comparing yourself favorably to others who sin worse. Agreeing with God that you are a sinner, that your sin is serious, that you deserve judgment, and that you desperately need His mercy.

C.S. Lewis captures this perfectly: "Repentance is not something God demands of you before He will take you back and which He could let you off if He chose; it is simply a description of what going back is like."

You can't go back to God while still running away from Him. You can't return to the Father while still insisting you have the right to live in the far country. You can't come home while still claiming you never left.

Going back to God requires turning around. That's repentance. It's not an arbitrary hoop God makes you jump through. It's the nature of returning.

Repentance in the Gospel Message

Notice the structure of Jesus's first gospel proclamation:

1. "The time is fulfilled" — God's appointed moment has arrived
2. "The kingdom of God is at hand" — God's reign is breaking into human history
3. "Repent" — Turn from your rebellion and align with God's kingdom
4. "Believe in the gospel" — Trust the good news about what God has done in Christ

Repentance comes before faith. Not chronologically separate—they happen together, two sides of the same coin—but logically prior. You can't truly believe the gospel until you've repented of the sin the gospel addresses.

If you don't think you're a sinner in need of saving, you don't need a Savior. If you don't acknowledge you're lost, you don't need to be found. If you don't recognize you're dead in your transgressions, you don't need resurrection.

Repentance is the acknowledgment of need that makes the gospel good news. Without repentance, the gospel is just irrelevant information about something that happened to someone else a long time ago.

Peter preaches the same message on Pentecost. The crowd, convicted by the Holy Spirit, asks, "Brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37, NASB).

Peter's answer: "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38, NASB).

Repent first. Then baptism. Then forgiveness. Then the gift of the Spirit. The order matters.

Later, Peter preaches again: "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19, NASB).

Repent and return. Turn around and come back. Your sins will be wiped away. Times of refreshing will come. But it starts with repentance.

Paul summarizes his entire ministry this way: "I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:19-20, NASB).

Repent. Turn to God. Perform deeds that prove the repentance is real. That's the consistent message throughout the New Testament.

Repentance isn't a minor theme you can skip over to get to the "good parts" of the gospel. It's the doorway to everything else. It's the first step. It's non-negotiable.

What We Put First Instead

The human tendency is to avoid repentance at all costs. We'll try everything else first. We'll offer God our religious activity, our good intentions, our comparative righteousness, our excuses, our explanations—anything but genuine repentance.

Scripture gives us vivid examples of people who put other things first instead of repentance.

Saul/Paul Before Damascus: Religious Zeal Without Repentance

Before he was Paul the apostle, he was Saul the Pharisee. And he was zealous. Passionate. Committed. Absolutely convinced he was serving God.

Luke describes him this way: "Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1-2, NASB).

Breathing threats and murder. Hunting down Christians to imprison them. Traveling to other cities to expand his persecution campaign. All in the name of defending God's truth and protecting Jewish orthodoxy.

Saul put religious zeal first. He thought his passion for defending tradition proved his devotion to God. He believed his strict adherence to the Law made him righteous. He was "advancing in Judaism beyond many of [his] contemporaries, being more extremely zealous for [his] ancestral traditions" (Galatians 1:14, NASB).

He was doing what he thought was right. He was sincere. Committed. Zealous.

And he was completely wrong.

It took Jesus personally confronting him on the Damascus road to break through his religious certainty:

"As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do'" (Acts 9:3-6, NASB).

Everything Saul thought he knew was wrong. Everything he was zealous for was misguided. The One he thought he was serving, he was actually persecuting. His religious zeal was rebellion against the very God he claimed to worship.

And Saul had to repent. Not just of specific actions—though he certainly needed to repent of murdering Christians. But of his entire orientation. His self-righteousness. His confidence in his own religious performance. His belief that zeal and sincerity were enough.

Later, as Paul, he would write: "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Philippians 3:7-9, NASB).

All his religious credentials, all his zeal, all his achievements—rubbish. Loss. Worthless compared to knowing Christ and receiving His righteousness.

But he had to repent first. He had to acknowledge that everything he'd been putting first—his religious zeal, his self-righteousness, his confidence in his own performance—was actually keeping him from God.

How many people today are making the same mistake? Religious but unrepentant. Zealous but self-righteous. Active in church but never acknowledging their desperate need for grace.

They put religious activity first. Church attendance. Bible knowledge. Ministry involvement. Moral performance. And they think these things prove they're right with God.

But without repentance—without acknowledging that all our righteousness is like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6), that we're sinners who deserve judgment, that we need mercy not merit—all the religious zeal in the world is just rebellion with a spiritual veneer.

The Prodigal Son's Brother: Self-Justification Over Repentance

We've looked at the older brother before, but his response to his father reveals another tragic substitute for repentance: self-justification.

When the father celebrates the prodigal's return, the older brother refuses to join the party:

"But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him'" (Luke 15:28-30, NASB).

Listen to what the older brother puts first:

"I have been serving you."

"I have never neglected a command."

"You have never given *me* anything."

"Look at what *I've* done. Look at how good *I've* been."

He's keeping score. Tallying up his obedience. Comparing himself to his brother. Demanding recognition for his faithful service. Justifying himself.

And in all of that self-justification, he never once repents. He never acknowledges his own sin—his lovelessness, his judgmentalism, his mercenary view of relationship with his father, his joy-killing self-righteousness.

He doesn't think he needs to repent. He's the good son. The faithful one. The one who stayed. The one who obeyed. If anyone needs to repent, it's his rebellious brother.

And he completely misses that his self-righteous refusal to celebrate grace is just as much rebellion as his brother's wild living in the far country. Different sin, same root problem: a heart far from the father.

The tragedy is that the older brother was "always" with the father (Luke 15:31), but he never understood the father's heart. He served but never loved. He obeyed but never rejoiced. He stayed physically but remained emotionally distant.

And when confronted with extravagant grace toward someone undeserving, his response wasn't joy but resentment. Not celebration but anger. Not gratitude that grace is available but fury that it was extended to someone else.

He put self-justification first. "Look at me. Look at what *I've* done. I deserve better than this." And that self-justification made repentance impossible.

Because repentance requires admitting you don't deserve anything. Admitting that you're a sinner too—just a different kind. Admitting that you need grace just as desperately as the prodigal, even if your rebellion took a more respectable form.

How many Christians are living as older brothers? Going through all the religious motions. Doing all the right things. Serving, obeying, staying faithful. But hearts full of self-righteousness, resentment, and judgmentalism.

They compare themselves to others and always come out ahead. "At least I'm not like that sinner." "At least I've been faithful." "At least I haven't done what they did."

And they never repent. Never acknowledge their own desperate need. Never recognize that their self-righteousness is just as offensive to God as blatant immorality.

They put self-justification first. And it keeps them outside the celebration while convincing them they're the ones who deserve to be inside.

King Saul: Excuses Over Genuine Repentance

King Saul provides one of the most instructive examples of false repentance in Scripture. God gives him a clear command through the prophet Samuel:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey'" (1 Samuel 15:2-3, NASB).

The command is specific. Clear. No ambiguity. Utterly destroy everything. No exceptions.

But Saul disobeys:

"But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed" (1 Samuel 15:9, NASB).

They keep the king alive. They keep the best of the livestock. They do what makes sense to them instead of what God commanded.

When Samuel confronts Saul, watch what happens:

"Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, 'Blessed are you of the Lord! I have carried out the command of the Lord.' But Samuel said, 'What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?'" (1 Samuel 15:13-14, NASB).

Saul's first response isn't repentance. It's denial. "I have carried out the command of the Lord."

Really? Then why do we hear animals that were supposed to be destroyed?

Saul shifts to excuse-making:

"Saul said, 'They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed'" (1 Samuel 15:15, NASB).

Notice: "The *people* spared them." Not "I disobeyed." Not "I failed to carry out God's command." *They* did it. I'm not responsible.

And we're going to use them to sacrifice to God, so it's actually a good thing. We're being religious with our disobedience.

Samuel cuts through the excuses:

"Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king" (1 Samuel 15:22-23, NASB).

God doesn't want your religious activity performed with the spoils of your disobedience. He wants obedience. And your rebellion—even when dressed up in religious language and sacrificial offerings—is as serious as witchcraft and idolatry.

Now watch Saul's response:

"Then Saul said to Samuel, 'I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and listened to their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me, that I may worship the Lord'" (1 Samuel 15:24-25, NASB).

Finally, confession, right? "I have sinned."

But watch closely. Even in his confession, Saul is still making excuses: "because I feared the people and listened to their voice."

It's not really my fault. I was pressured. The people wanted to keep the livestock. What was I supposed to do?

And his concern isn't genuine sorrow over sin. It's maintaining appearances: "Please... return with me, that I may worship the Lord." He wants Samuel there so it looks like everything is fine. He wants to maintain his public reputation.

Samuel refuses: "I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:26, NASB).

Saul tries again:

"Then he said, 'I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may worship the Lord your God'" (1 Samuel 15:30, NASB).

"I have sinned; but..." There's always a "but." And his real concern: "Please honor me before the elders and Israel." Don't let them see that I've been rejected. Let me save face. Help me maintain my position.

This isn't repentance. This is damage control. This is trying to minimize consequences while avoiding genuine acknowledgment of sin.

Real repentance says, "I was wrong. I have no excuse. I deserve judgment. God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

False repentance says, "I sinned, but it wasn't really my fault. And can we just move past this and make me look good again?"

Saul put excuses first. Public reputation first. Maintaining his position first. And he never experienced genuine repentance—never had that complete change of heart and direction that would have restored his relationship with God.

How many of us are like Saul? Quick to say "I'm sorry" but slow to genuinely repent. Full of explanations and excuses for our sin. More concerned with managing our reputation than truly changing.

We confess sin while minimizing it. We acknowledge failure while blaming others. We perform religious acts while our hearts remain unchanged. We say the words of repentance while our actions reveal we never truly turned around.

We put excuses first. Reputation first. Avoiding consequences first. And we wonder why our relationship with God feels distant, why His blessing seems absent, why we're going through the religious motions but experiencing no transformation.

Why Jesus Prioritizes Repentance

Jesus doesn't begin His ministry with "Repent" because He's harsh or judgmental or trying to make people feel bad. He begins there because repentance is absolutely essential. It's the doorway to everything else.

Repentance Is the Doorway to the Kingdom

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15, NASB).

You cannot enter God's kingdom while still in rebellion against the King. You cannot receive His reign while insisting on your own sovereignty. You cannot experience His rule while demanding autonomy.

Repentance is how you submit to the King. How you acknowledge His rightful authority. How you surrender your rebellion and align yourself with His kingdom.

The kingdom is "at hand"—it's right here, available, breaking into history through Jesus. But accessing it requires repentance. Turning from your kingdom (the one where you're in charge, where your will is done, where you rule) to His kingdom (where He is Lord, where His will is done, where He rules).

This is why John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by preaching repentance: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2, NASB). You must repent to receive the King.

Without repentance, you're like the tenants in Jesus's parable who refused to acknowledge the landowner's authority, even killed his son, and claimed the vineyard for themselves (Matthew 21:33-41). You're in active rebellion, calling yourself king of a kingdom that isn't yours.

Repentance dethrones you and enthrones Jesus. It acknowledges His rightful lordship and your rightful place as subject, servant, surrendered follower.

No Transformation Without Acknowledgment of Need

You cannot be healed unless you first acknowledge you're sick. You cannot be saved unless you first acknowledge you're lost. You cannot be forgiven unless you first acknowledge you're guilty.

This is why Jesus says, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17, NASB).

If you think you're healthy, you won't go to the physician. If you think you're righteous, you won't receive the Savior. You'll see no need for His grace because you don't think you need grace.

Repentance is the acknowledgment of need. "I'm sick. I'm lost. I'm guilty. I'm a sinner who desperately needs mercy."

Without that acknowledgment, transformation is impossible. Not because God is unwilling to transform you, but because you're unwilling to be transformed. You're like a patient who refuses to admit they have cancer, insisting they just need some vitamins and a good night's sleep. The treatment is available, but you won't receive it because you won't acknowledge the disease.

Billy Graham understood this from decades of ministry: "The Christian life is not a constant high. I have my moments of deep discouragement. I have to go to God in prayer with tears in my eyes, and say, 'O God, forgive me,' or 'Help me.'"

Even after conversion, we need ongoing repentance. Because sanctification requires continued acknowledgment of our ongoing need for grace. We keep discovering new areas of sin, new depths of our brokenness, new ways we fall short of God's glory.

And each discovery requires repentance—acknowledgment that we were wrong, God is right, and we need to turn around in this area too.

Repentance Precedes Relationship Restoration

Every broken relationship follows the same pattern for restoration: acknowledgment of wrong, genuine sorrow, and changed behavior.

If you've wounded someone and you want reconciliation, you can't just pretend it never happened. You can't minimize it or make excuses. You have to acknowledge what you did, express genuine remorse, and demonstrate through changed behavior that you've truly repented.

The same is true—ininitely more true—in our relationship with God.

Sin breaks relationship with God. We've turned away from Him, rebelled against His authority, violated His commands, preferred our way to His. That breach must be addressed before relationship can be restored.

And the way it's addressed is through repentance. Acknowledging what we've done. Agreeing with God about the seriousness of our sin. Turning away from it and turning toward Him.

Peter makes this explicit: "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away" (Acts 3:19, NASB).

Repent and *return*. The language is relational. You've left. You've wandered. You've gone your own way. Now come back. Return to the Father. But returning requires repentance—turning around and going the opposite direction.

The prodigal son demonstrates this perfectly. He's in the far country, feeding pigs, starving, miserable. And he has a moment of clarity:

"But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men"' (Luke 15:17-19, NASB).

Three elements of genuine repentance:

1. **Recognition of reality:** "I'm dying here." He stops making excuses, stops pretending everything is fine, and acknowledges his desperate condition.
2. **Decision to return:** "I will get up and go to my father." Repentance is active. It's not just feeling bad while staying in the pig pen. It's getting up and going home.

3. **Confession without excuse:** "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." No excuses. No blaming. No self-justification. Just honest acknowledgment of sin and unworthiness.

And the father's response? He sees him "while he was still a long way off" and runs to him, embraces him, restores him (Luke 15:20-24).

But none of that reconciliation happens without the son's repentance. Without him coming to his senses, getting up, going home, and confessing his sin.

Relationship with God works the same way. He's always ready to receive us. Always watching for our return. Always prepared to embrace us. But we have to repent. We have to turn around and come home.

The Way Forward: Genuine Repentance Today

So how do we actually repent? How do we move beyond the counterfeit versions—the excuses, the self-justification, the religious activity without heart change—to genuine, biblical repentance?

Examine Your Heart Honestly

Ask the Holy Spirit to search you: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way" (Psalm 139:23-24, NASB).

Where are you in rebellion? Where are you going your own way? Where are you ignoring God's clear commands? Where are you making excuses for sin?

Don't compare yourself to others. Don't justify yourself by pointing to worse sinners. Don't minimize your sin by calling it "mistakes" or "struggles."

Call it what God calls it: sin. Rebellion. Transgression. Iniquity.

Agree with God About Your Sin

Repentance means seeing your sin the way God sees it—not the way you've been excusing it, explaining it away, or minimizing it.

God says it's serious. You agree.

God says it deserves judgment. You agree.

God says it's rebellion against His authority. You agree.

God says you have no excuse. You agree.

This is what 1 John 1:9 means when it says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (NASB).

The word "confess" (*homologeō*) means to say the same thing, to agree with. Confession is agreeing with God about your sin.

Turn Around—Actually Change Direction

Repentance isn't just mental acknowledgment. It's change. Turning around. Going a different direction.

If you've been pursuing sexual immorality, repentance means turning away from it and pursuing purity. Not just feeling bad about it while continuing to indulge. Actual change.

If you've been consumed with greed, repentance means turning toward generosity. If you've been characterized by bitterness, repentance means turning toward forgiveness. If you've been living for yourself, repentance means turning toward surrender to God.

This is what John the Baptist demanded: "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8, NASB). Real repentance produces real change. Your life shows evidence that you've turned around.

Stop Making Excuses

No "but." No "because." No blaming others or circumstances.

Not "I sinned, but they provoked me."

Not "I failed, but I was under so much pressure."

Not "I disobeyed, but I had good intentions."

Just: "I sinned. I was wrong. I have no excuse. God, have mercy on me."

King David models this when confronted about his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah: "Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord'" (2 Samuel 12:13, NASB).

No excuses. No explanations. No attempts to minimize. Just acknowledgment: "I have sinned."

And later, in Psalm 51, he pours out genuine repentance:

"Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity And cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, And my sin is ever before me.

Against You, You only, I have sinned And done what is evil in Your sight" (Psalm 51:1-4, NASB).

This is what genuine repentance sounds like. No excuses. Total ownership. Desperate plea for mercy.

Receive God's Forgiveness

Here's the glorious truth: God forgives genuinely repentant sinners. Always. Completely. Without hesitation.

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NASB).

Not "He might forgive if you grovel enough." Not "He'll eventually forgive after you've punished yourself sufficiently." He is faithful and righteous to forgive—period.

When you repent, God doesn't hold your sin against you. He doesn't keep bringing it up. He doesn't treat you with suspicion or make you earn your way back into His good graces.

He wipes your sins away (Acts 3:19). He removes them as far as east is from west (Psalm 103:12). He remembers them no more (Jeremiah 31:34).

Receive that forgiveness. Don't wallow in guilt after God has forgiven you. Don't punish yourself when God has declared you forgiven. Don't keep rehearsing sins God has already forgotten.

Repent genuinely. Then receive forgiveness fully.

Make Repentance a Lifestyle

Repentance isn't a one-time event at conversion. It's a way of life.

As you grow in Christ, the Holy Spirit will keep revealing areas that need to change. Sins you didn't even recognize as sin. Idols you didn't know you were worshiping. Patterns of rebellion that have been so normalized you thought they were fine.

Each revelation is an invitation to repent. To agree with God, turn around, and change.

Martin Luther's first of his 95 Theses declared: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

The Christian life is marked by ongoing repentance. Not because you keep losing your salvation. Not because God's forgiveness runs out. But because sanctification is the process of the Holy Spirit progressively revealing sin and transforming you into Christ's image.

And every step of that transformation requires repentance—acknowledging the sin, agreeing with God about it, and turning from it toward righteousness.

The First Word and the Last Word

Repentance is the first word of the gospel. Jesus began His ministry with it. The apostles preached it. The early church practiced it.

And it's also one of the last words in Scripture. In Revelation, Jesus addresses seven churches, and five of them receive the same command: "Repent" (Revelation 2:5, 16, 21; 3:3, 19).

Churches. Not unbelievers. Not pagans. *Churches*. Groups of people who claim to follow Jesus. And Jesus says to them: Repent.

You've left your first love? Repent.

You're tolerating false teaching? Repent.

You're compromising with the world? Repent.

You're spiritually asleep? Repent.

You're lukewarm? Repent.

The call to repentance never ends. Because we're always discovering new areas where we've been going our own way instead of God's way. Always finding new pockets of rebellion. Always uncovering new depths of our need for grace.

And that's not discouraging—it's liberating. Because every call to repentance is an invitation to experience God's mercy anew. Every acknowledgment of sin is an opportunity to receive fresh forgiveness. Every turning around is a step deeper into relationship with the Father who's always waiting to welcome repentant children home.

So repent. First. Before you do anything else. Before you try to earn your way back. Before you perform religious acts to compensate. Before you make excuses or explanations.

Just repent. Turn around. Come home.

The Father is watching for you. And He's ready to run.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

– Mark 1:15, NASB

Chapter 7: Believe First

Mark 11:22-24; John 20:24-29

The Impossible Demand

Jesus and His disciples are walking from Bethany to Jerusalem the morning after Jesus cursed a fig tree for having no fruit. As they pass the tree again, Peter notices something remarkable:

"As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, 'Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered'" (Mark 11:20-21, NASB).

Peter is amazed. Yesterday the tree was alive. Today it's dead from the roots up. One word from Jesus and the tree withered completely.

And Jesus uses this moment to teach something that sounds almost absurd:

"Jesus answered saying to them, 'Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be taken up and cast into the sea," and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you'" (Mark 11:22-24, NASB).

Read that again carefully. Jesus just said that if you have faith—if you believe without doubting in your heart—you can tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea and it will happen. You can pray for anything, believe you've received it, and it will be granted to you.

This is an outrageous claim. It sounds like magical thinking. It sounds like the kind of thing prosperity preachers use to promise health and wealth to anyone who just "believes hard enough."

But Jesus says it. Multiple times. In multiple ways. This teaching about faith appears throughout the Gospels.

So what is Jesus actually saying? What does it mean to believe first? And why does He make faith the prerequisite for everything else?

The Nature of Biblical Faith

Before we can understand why belief must come first, we need to understand what biblical faith actually is—because we've often misunderstood it.

Faith is not:

- Believing something you know isn't true
- Wishful thinking with religious language
- Positive mental attitude
- Working up emotional conviction
- Ignoring evidence or abandoning reason

Biblical faith is trusting God's character and promises enough to act on them before you see the outcome.

The word Jesus uses in Mark 11:22 is *pistis*—faith, trust, confidence, belief. It's active, not passive. It's relational, not merely intellectual. It's risky, not safe.

Hebrews 11:1 defines it this way: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (NASB).

Faith is being sure of what you hope for. Convinced of what you can't yet see. It's trusting that God is who He says He is and will do what He says He'll do—and living accordingly before you have proof.

Hebrews 11:6 makes it even clearer: "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (NASB).

To come to God, you must believe two things:

1. That He exists (*that He is*)
2. That He rewards those who earnestly seek Him (*that He is a rewarder*)

You can't demand proof first and then believe. You can't insist on seeing before trusting. You have to believe *that He is* before you experience Him. You have to trust *that He rewards* before you receive the reward.

This is what makes faith risky. You're staking your life on Someone you can't see, trusting promises you haven't yet seen fulfilled, acting on truth you can't empirically verify.

Martin Luther captured this perfectly: "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times."

Living. Daring. Confident. Sure. Certain. These aren't the words of passive hope or tentative maybe-thinking. This is radical trust that changes how you live.

Believing Without Seeing

One week after Jesus's resurrection, the disciples are gathered in a locked room. Jesus appears to them—walking through walls, showing them His hands and side, proving He's alive.

But Thomas isn't there. And when the others tell him what happened, his response is famous:

"So the other disciples were saying to him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe'" (John 20:25, NASB).

"I will not believe." Not until I see. Not until I touch. Not until I have empirical, physical, undeniable proof.

Thomas wants proof first. Belief second. He'll trust after he sees, not before.

One week later, Jesus appears again—this time with Thomas present:

"Then He said to Thomas, 'Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.' Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed'" (John 20:27-29, NASB).

Jesus gives Thomas what he demanded—the opportunity to see and touch. And Thomas believes. He makes the greatest confession in the Gospel of John: "My Lord and my God!"

But then Jesus says something crucial: "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

There's no condemnation in Jesus's words toward Thomas. But there's a clear distinction: Thomas believed because he saw. But blessed—more blessed, specially blessed—are those who believe *without* seeing.

Why? Because that's real faith. That's trust. That's believing that He is before you experience that He is. That's staking your life on God's word before you see the evidence.

And that's what Jesus requires of us. We don't get to see Him physically. We don't get to touch His resurrection body. We don't get to demand proof and then believe only after we're convinced.

We're called to believe first. To trust before we see. To have faith before we have proof.

This is the path of every person who comes to Christ: You believe He exists before you experience Him. You trust He died for your sins before you feel forgiven. You rely on His promises before you see them fulfilled. You stake your life on His word before you have empirical verification.

Lesslie Newbigin writes: "Believing is not a separate compartment in a person's life, a pigeon-hole into which he can slip his faith so that it does not disturb him."

Faith isn't something you add to your life while keeping everything else the same. Faith reorganizes everything. It's the foundation you build your entire existence on. It determines how you think, what you value, how you spend your time and money, what risks you take, what you're willing to sacrifice.

And it comes first. Before proof. Before experience. Before certainty. Before comfort.

What We Put First Instead

The human tendency is to reverse this order. We want proof first, then we'll believe. We want to see first, then we'll trust. We want guarantees first, then we'll commit.

We put sight before faith. Evidence before trust. Proof before belief.

And Scripture gives us sobering examples of what happens when we get the order wrong.

Thomas: Proof Before Faith

We've already seen Thomas's demand: "Unless I see... I will not believe" (John 20:25).

Thomas gets a bad rap as "Doubting Thomas," but he's actually just being honest about what most of us feel. He wants evidence. He wants verification. He wants to be sure before he commits.

The problem isn't that he had doubts. The problem is that he made proof a prerequisite for belief. He put seeing before trusting.

And he's not alone. Throughout the Gospels, people demand signs before they'll believe:

The Pharisees and Sadducees approach Jesus: "Show us a sign from heaven" (Matthew 16:1, NASB). Prove yourself, then we'll believe.

Jesus's response is sharp: "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah" (Matthew 16:4, NASB).

You want proof? The only sign you're getting is the resurrection—and even that won't convince you if you're determined not to believe.

After Jesus feeds five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, the crowd comes looking for more free food. Jesus confronts them:

"Jesus answered them and said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled'" (John 6:26, NASB).

You're not seeking truth. You're seeking another meal. You're not pursuing Me. You're pursuing comfort and provision.

And when Jesus teaches difficult truth—about eating His flesh and drinking His blood—many disciples are offended and stop following Him:

"As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. So Jesus said to the twelve, 'You do not want to go away also, do you?' Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God'" (John 6:66-69, NASB).

Notice Peter's statement: "We have *believed* and have come to *know*."

The order: belief first, knowledge second. Trust first, understanding second. Faith first, proof second.

Thomas wanted it reversed: knowledge first, then belief. Proof first, then trust. And Jesus gently corrects him while still giving him what he needed to believe.

But we're not all going to get a personal resurrection appearance. We're not all going to see Jesus physically and touch His wounds. We're called to believe without seeing. To trust without touching. To have faith without physical proof.

That's harder. Much harder. Which is why Jesus says those who believe without seeing are specially blessed.

How many people today are making Thomas's mistake? "Show me proof of God, then I'll believe." "Let me see a miracle, then I'll trust." "Give me evidence that eliminates all doubt, then I'll commit."

But faith doesn't work that way. You don't get certainty first and faith second. You get faith first, and certainty grows as you walk in that faith.

Zechariah: Doubt Before Trust

Zechariah is a priest, righteous and blameless, serving in the temple. He and his wife Elizabeth have no children, and they're both old—long past childbearing years.

One day while Zechariah is burning incense in the temple, the angel Gabriel appears to him with incredible news:

"But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John... and he will be great in the sight of the Lord... and he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God'" (Luke 1:13-16, NASB).

This is a direct message from an angel. A supernatural appearance. A specific promise about a son who will prepare the way for the Messiah.

And Zechariah's response?

"Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years'" (Luke 1:18, NASB).

"How will I know this for certain?" Translation: "I need more proof. Give me evidence. I can't just take your word for it."

He puts doubt before trust. Skepticism before faith. Demand for certainty before belief.

The angel's response is swift and severe:

"The angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time'" (Luke 1:19-20, NASB).

You wanted a sign? Here's your sign: You're going to be mute for nine months because you didn't believe.

Contrast this with Mary's response to Gabriel's announcement that she'll bear the Messiah:

"Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'" (Luke 1:34, NASB).

She asks a question too. But notice the difference. Zechariah asks, "How will I know this for certain?"—demanding proof. Mary asks, "How can this be?"—seeking understanding while already believing.

Zechariah doubts. Mary wonders. Zechariah demands evidence. Mary asks for explanation.

And the outcomes are different. Zechariah is struck mute. Mary responds: "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38, NASB).

May it be done. Not "prove it to me first." Not "give me certainty before I commit." Just: I believe. Do what You've said.

How many Christians live like Zechariah rather than Mary? God speaks—through His Word, through His Spirit, through circumstances—and we respond with doubt first. "How will I know this for certain? Give me more proof. Convince me."

We pray for clarity but we really want certainty. We ask for guidance but we really want guarantees. We claim to seek God's will but we won't commit to it until we've eliminated all risk.

We put doubt before trust. Skepticism before faith. And we wonder why we spend our lives stuck in spiritual barrenness instead of experiencing the supernatural fruitfulness God promises.

The Israelites at Kadesh Barnea: Fear Before Faith

After God delivers Israel from Egypt—through ten plagues, through the Red Sea parting, through pillar of cloud and fire—He brings them to the edge of the Promised Land.

Moses sends twelve spies to scout out Canaan. They return after forty days with a report:

"We came in to the land where you sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large; and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there" (Numbers 13:27-28, NASB).

Ten of the spies focus on the obstacles: "The people are strong. The cities are fortified. There are giants there."

Only Caleb and Joshua focus on God's promise: "We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it" (Numbers 13:30, NASB).

But the majority report wins. The people believe the obstacles more than they believe God's promise:

"Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?'" (Numbers 14:1-3, NASB).

They'd rather die in Egypt—the place of slavery—than trust God in the Promised Land. They'd rather go back to bondage than move forward in faith.

Why? Fear. They put fear before faith. They believed in the giants more than they believed in God. They trusted what they could see more than what God had promised.

And God's response reveals how seriously He takes this failure:

"But indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord. Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it" (Numbers 14:21-23, NASB).

An entire generation—everyone twenty years old and older—will die in the wilderness. They will never enter the Promised Land. Because they refused to believe. Because they put fear before faith.

Only Caleb and Joshua, who believed God's promise despite the obstacles, will enter the land.

The writer of Hebrews reflects on this tragedy:

"And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:18-19, NASB).

They couldn't enter because of unbelief. Not because they weren't strong enough to defeat the giants. Not because the obstacles were too great. Because they didn't believe God.

How many Christians are living at Kadesh Barnea? God has promised you something—a calling, a ministry, a step of obedience, a sacrifice He's asking you to make. You can see the promise. You know it's real. You've even tasted fruit from that land.

But you also see the obstacles. The giants. The fortified cities. The risks. The costs. The very real possibility of failure from a human perspective.

And you put fear before faith. You believe the obstacles more than the promise. You trust what you can see more than what God has said.

So you stay in the wilderness. Wandering. Waiting. Hoping for a sign that will make the risk feel manageable. Demanding proof that it will work out before you'll step forward in faith.

And you spend your whole life circling the same mountain, never entering the promise, because you refused to believe first.

Why Jesus Prioritizes Faith

Jesus doesn't make faith a prerequisite because He's being arbitrary or difficult. He prioritizes belief first because faith is absolutely foundational to everything else in the Christian life.

Faith Is the Foundation of Relationship with God

You cannot have a relationship with God without faith. It's impossible.

"And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6, NASB).

Without faith, it's impossible to please God. Not difficult. Not challenging. *Impossible*.

Why? Because faith is the foundation of trust, and trust is the foundation of relationship.

You can't have a meaningful relationship with someone you don't trust. You can't be close to someone you're constantly doubting. You can't love deeply someone you're always demanding proof from.

Imagine a marriage where one spouse constantly demands the other prove their love.

"Show me evidence. Give me guarantees. Convince me you're not going to leave." That's not a relationship—it's a hostage negotiation.

Healthy relationships are built on trust. You believe the other person is who they say they are. You trust their character even when you can't see their actions. You have faith in their commitment even when circumstances make you question.

The same is true—ininitely more true—with God. You have to believe He is before you can know Him. You have to trust He rewards those who seek Him before you experience those rewards. You have to have faith in His character before you see all the evidence.

This is why the gospel starts with faith: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9, NASB).

Salvation comes through faith. Not through proof. Not through perfect understanding. Not through eliminating all doubts. Through faith—trusting that Christ died for your sins and rose again, believing that He is who He says He is, staking your eternal destiny on His finished work.

And once you're saved, you continue by faith: "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7, NASB).

Every step of the Christian life is by faith. Trusting God when you can't see the outcome. Obeying when it doesn't make sense. Giving when you're not sure you'll have enough. Forgiving when justice hasn't been served. Loving when you might get hurt.

Faith first. Always. Because without it, relationship with God is impossible.

Belief Precedes Experience

One of the most counterintuitive truths about faith is that you have to believe before you experience, not the other way around.

Jesus says it explicitly in Mark 11:24: "Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, *believe that you have received them*, and they will be granted you" (NASB, emphasis added).

Believe you have received them—present tense, already done—and *then* they will be granted you.

This sounds backwards. Shouldn't it be: They will be granted you, and then you'll believe you've received them?

But that's not how faith works. Faith believes before it sees. Trusts before it experiences. Acts on the promise before the promise is fulfilled.

Throughout Hebrews 11, the great "hall of faith" chapter, we see the same pattern:

"By faith Abel offered..." (v. 4)

"By faith Noah... prepared an ark" (v. 7)

"By faith Abraham... obeyed" (v. 8)

"By faith Sarah... received ability to conceive" (v. 11)

They acted in faith *before* they saw the results. Abel offered before God accepted. Noah built before the flood came. Abraham obeyed before he saw the promise fulfilled. Sarah believed before she conceived.

And then comes this summary:

"All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13, NASB).

Many of them died without seeing the fulfillment. They believed the promise. They lived according to the promise. But they didn't live to see it fully realized.

Yet they're commended for their faith. Not for their results. Not for what they achieved or experienced. For their faith—for believing God's promises even when they didn't see them fulfilled in their lifetime.

This is crucial for us to understand. God is not a vending machine where you insert faith and immediately receive what you want. Faith is trusting God's character and promises even when the timing, the method, and sometimes even the outcome are different from what you expected.

You believe God is good before you feel His goodness. You trust He's working all things for good before you see how the pieces fit together. You have faith He'll provide before the provision shows up.

Belief comes first. Experience follows. Sometimes immediately. Sometimes after a long wait. Sometimes not until eternity.

But the order is always: faith first, sight second.

Trust Demonstrates Surrender to God's Character

When you demand proof before you believe, you're essentially saying: "God, I don't trust You enough to take Your word for it. Prove Yourself to me first."

When you believe without seeing, you're saying: "God, I trust Your character more than I trust my circumstances. I trust Your promises more than I trust my perceptions. I trust You."

This is why faith pleases God. Not because He's insecure and needs us to believe in Him. But because faith demonstrates surrender. It shows that we're trusting His character over our comfort, His wisdom over our understanding, His ways over our ways.

Faith says:

- "I don't see how You're going to work this out, but I trust that You will"
- "I don't understand why this is happening, but I believe You're good"
- "I can't see the path forward, but I trust You'll guide me"
- "This doesn't make sense to me, but I believe Your Word"

This is the faith God honors. Not perfect certainty—most people in Scripture who exhibited great faith also had moments of doubt. But surrender. Trust. Willingness to believe His word over their circumstances.

Abraham is called the father of faith. Why? Because "he did not waver in unbelief at the promise of God, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform" (Romans 4:20-21, NASB).

He didn't waver. Even though he was a hundred years old and Sarah was ninety. Even though having a child was biologically impossible. He believed God's promise. He trusted God's character. He had faith that what God promised, He was able to perform.

That's the faith Jesus is calling us to. Not blind faith that ignores reality. But confident faith that trusts God's character more than current circumstances.

The Way Forward: Believing First Today

So how do we actually live by faith? How do we believe first when everything in us wants proof, certainty, guarantees?

Feed Your Faith, Starve Your Doubt

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ (Romans 10:17). You grow in faith by feeding on God's Word—His promises, His character, His faithfulness throughout history.

Doubt grows when you feed on circumstances, feelings, worst-case scenarios, and fearful projections.

So make a deliberate choice: Feed your faith. Spend more time in Scripture than in speculation. Meditate on God's promises more than your problems. Rehearse His faithfulness more than your fears.

When doubt whispers "What if this doesn't work out?" respond with truth from God's Word: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28, NASB).

When fear says "You can't do this," respond with: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13, NASB).

When anxiety screams "You're going to run out," respond with: "And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19, NASB).

Feed faith. Starve doubt.

Act on What God Has Said Before You Feel Ready

Faith is not just mental assent. It's action. You prove you believe by how you live.

James writes: "Faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself" (James 2:17, NASB).

Dead faith is faith that believes intellectually but never acts. Living faith is faith that believes and therefore obeys.

So when God calls you to something—a step of obedience, a financial sacrifice, a risky ministry, a difficult conversation—don't wait until you feel ready. Don't wait until all your questions are answered. Don't wait until the fear goes away.

Believe God's word. Then act on it. Before you feel prepared. Before you have all the details figured out. Before you can see how it's going to work out.

That's faith. Trusting God enough to obey before you see the outcome.

Noah built an ark before rain had ever fallen. Abraham left his homeland without knowing the destination. Moses confronted Pharaoh before he had any idea how God would deliver Israel. David faced Goliath before he knew if the stone would find its mark.

They acted in faith. And God showed up.

Focus on God's Character, Not Your Circumstances

When you're trying to have faith, you'll be tempted to keep examining your circumstances, looking for evidence that God is working, searching for signs of progress.

But faith focuses on God's character, not changing circumstances.

The three Hebrew boys facing Nebuchadnezzar's furnace demonstrated this perfectly:

"Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up'" (Daniel 3:16-18, NASB).

"Our God is able to deliver us. And He will. But even if He doesn't, we're still not bowing."

That's faith rooted in God's character, not dependent on favorable outcomes. They believed God was able. They trusted God would deliver. But their faith didn't require a particular outcome. Even if God chose not to deliver them, they were still trusting Him.

Your circumstances will change—sometimes favorably, sometimes not. But God's character never changes. He is always good, always faithful, always sovereign, always working for your ultimate good.

Anchor your faith in that unchanging reality, not in the shifting circumstances.

Pray for Faith

If you struggle with belief, ask God to help your unbelief. That's a legitimate prayer that God honors.

A father brings his demon-possessed son to Jesus, desperate for healing:

"Jesus said to him, 'If You can?' All things are possible to him who believes.' Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, 'I do believe; help my unbelief'" (Mark 9:23-24, NASB).

"I do believe; help my unbelief." What an honest prayer. "I have faith, but it's weak. I trust You, but I struggle. I believe, but help me believe more."

And Jesus heals the boy. He doesn't reject the father for imperfect faith. He honors the faith that's there and works despite the unbelief.

So pray: "Lord, increase my faith. Help me trust You more. Give me courage to believe Your promises even when I can't see the evidence. Strengthen my weak faith."

God delights to answer that prayer.

Remember What God Has Already Done

When you're struggling to believe for what's ahead, look back at what God has already done.

David faced Goliath with confidence not because he'd fought giants before, but because he'd seen God deliver him from lions and bears:

"David said to Saul, 'Your servant was tending his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went out after him and attacked him, and rescued it from his mouth... The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine'" (1 Samuel 17:34-37, NASB).

God delivered me before. He'll deliver me again.

What has God already done in your life? When did He provide when you didn't know where provision would come from? When did He guide when you couldn't see the path? When did He heal, restore, protect, sustain, deliver?

Remember. Rehearse. Let past faithfulness fuel present faith.

Accept That Faith Involves Risk

Here's the uncomfortable truth: genuine faith always involves risk. If there's no risk, you don't need faith.

You don't need faith to believe the sun will rise tomorrow—that's just observation of a predictable pattern. You need faith to believe God will provide when you've given away more than seems prudent. You need faith to believe God will come through when the diagnosis is grim. You need faith to believe God has called you when every circumstance seems to contradict it.

Faith is risky. It requires stepping out when you can't see the ground beneath you. It means obeying before you understand. It means giving before you know you'll have enough. It means trusting when you have no guarantee of the outcome.

And that's exactly the point. Faith pleases God because it requires dependence. It demonstrates that you're trusting Him more than you're trusting yourself.

So don't avoid the risk. Don't wait for faith that feels safe. Real faith never feels safe—it feels like stepping off a cliff and discovering there's solid ground beneath you that you couldn't see before you jumped.

The Blessing of Those Who Believe

Jesus's words to Thomas echo across the centuries to us:

"Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (John 20:29, NASB).

You are among those who did not see. You weren't there when Jesus walked on water, healed the sick, raised the dead. You didn't witness the crucifixion or the resurrection. You haven't seen Him physically.

And yet you're called to believe. To trust. To have faith.

And Jesus says you're blessed for it. Specially blessed. Not cursed to live in a later generation. Not disadvantaged by not being there. *Blessed* because your faith is faith in its purest form—trusting without physical proof, believing without empirical evidence, following without seeing.

This is the life of faith. Not easy. Not comfortable. Not safe.

But blessed. Because you're trusting the One who is infinitely trustworthy. You're believing promises from the One who cannot lie. You're staking your life on the Character who never fails.

So believe first. Before you see. Before you understand. Before you feel ready. Before you have proof.

Believe that He is. Believe that He rewards those who seek Him. Believe His promises even when circumstances contradict them. Believe His character even when His ways are mysterious.

That's the faith that pleases God. That's the faith that moves mountains. That's the faith that inherits the promises.

And that's the faith Jesus calls first—because everything else flows from it.

"And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him."

– Hebrews 11:6, NASB

PART FOUR: LOSING TO GAIN

Chapter 8: Lose Your Life First

Matthew 16:24-26

The Most Offensive Invitation

Peter has just made the greatest confession in human history. Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter declared, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:15-16, NASB).

Jesus commended him. This revelation came from the Father. On this rock—this confession of Christ's identity—Jesus would build His church. The gates of hell would not overpower it.

It's a mountain-top moment. Peter got it right. Finally, someone understands who Jesus really is.

And then, immediately, Jesus begins teaching them what this means:

"From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day" (Matthew 16:21, NASB).

Suffering. Death. Resurrection. This is where the Messiah is heading. Not to a throne in Jerusalem, but to a cross. Not to political victory, but to brutal execution.

Peter, still high from his correct confession, takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him: "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (Matthew 16:22, NASB).

Jesus's response is shocking in its severity:

"But He turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's'" (Matthew 16:23, NASB).

In the span of a few verses, Peter goes from being called blessed by Jesus to being called Satan. From being the rock on which the church will be built to being a stumbling block. From speaking revelation from the Father to speaking temptation from the enemy.

What happened?

Peter was thinking like a human, not like God. He was operating from the world's logic—self-preservation, avoiding suffering, pursuing safety and success. He couldn't reconcile

the Messiah with the cross. Surely God's Anointed One shouldn't suffer and die. Surely there's another way.

And Jesus rejects this thinking as satanic. Because it's the same temptation Satan offered in the wilderness: "Avoid the cross. Take the easy path. Save Yourself."

Then Jesus turns to all the disciples and makes one of the most offensive, countercultural, impossible-sounding invitations in all of Scripture:

"Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?'" (Matthew 16:24-26, NASB).

Read those words carefully. This is Jesus's invitation to discipleship. This is what it means to follow Him.

Not "invite Me into your heart and add Me to your life." Not "believe in Me and continue living however you want." Not "follow Me when it's convenient and beneficial."

Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Lose your life.

This is the cost of following Jesus. And He puts it first. Right up front. No bait and switch. No fine print. The price is clear: your life.

Not just cleaning up your behavior. Not just adding spiritual activities to your schedule. Your actual life. Everything you are, everything you have, everything you're clinging to—surrender it. Lose it. Die.

Only then, Jesus says, will you truly live.

What It Means to Deny Yourself

The first requirement: "he must deny himself."

The Greek word for "deny" is *aparneomai*—to disown, to refuse, to repudiate utterly. It's the same word used when Peter denied Jesus three times: "I do not know the man" (Matthew 26:72, NASB).

Jesus is saying: Disown yourself. Refuse yourself. Say "I do not know that man" to the person you've been, the self you've been protecting and promoting and serving.

This is far more radical than self-improvement. Self-improvement says, "Take the best version of yourself and make it better." Self-denial says, "That self must die."

It's more extreme than self-discipline. Self-discipline says, "Control your impulses, manage your desires, regulate your behavior." Self-denial says, "Stop living for yourself altogether."

It's the opposite of self-actualization. The world says, "Become who you truly are. Fulfill your potential. Express your authentic self." Jesus says, "Deny that self. Reject it. Say no to its demands, its desires, its right to rule."

This doesn't mean hating yourself or engaging in unhealthy self-rejection. It means dethroning yourself. It means you are no longer the center, the reference point, the one whose will matters most.

Paul captures this in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (NASB).

"It is no longer I who live." The "I" that lived for itself, that organized life around its own desires and plans and preferences—that "I" has been crucified. It no longer gets to make the decisions. It no longer calls the shots.

Instead, "Christ lives in me." He is now the organizing center. His will, His purposes, His glory become the reference point for everything.

Self-denial is the daily, hourly, moment-by-moment practice of saying "no" to self and "yes" to Christ. It's the refusal to let your feelings, preferences, comfort, reputation, safety, or success determine your choices.

It's saying:

- "I want to sleep in, but Christ calls me to pray—so I deny myself and pray"
- "I want to spend this money on myself, but Christ calls me to give—so I deny myself and give"
- "I want to avoid this difficult conversation, but Christ calls me to speak truth—so I deny myself and speak"
- "I want to hold this grudge, but Christ calls me to forgive—so I deny myself and forgive"
- "I want to preserve my reputation, but Christ calls me to confess—so I deny myself and confess"

Every single choice becomes an opportunity to either serve self or deny self. And Jesus says: If you want to follow Me, self-denial comes first.

What It Means to Take Up Your Cross

The second requirement: "take up his cross."

When Jesus said this, His disciples knew exactly what a cross meant. It wasn't a piece of jewelry. It wasn't a religious symbol. It was an instrument of execution.

The Romans used crucifixion for the worst criminals—traitors, rebels, slaves who ran away. And they made the condemned carry their own cross through the streets to the place of execution. It was the ultimate humiliation. A public spectacle of shame and defeat.

So when Jesus says "take up your cross," He's not talking about enduring minor inconveniences or handling life's little struggles. He's talking about death. Voluntary execution. Willingly walking toward your own death.

Luke's version adds a crucial word: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross *daily* and follow Me" (Luke 9:23, NASB, emphasis added).

Daily. This isn't a one-time event. This is a daily death. Every morning you wake up, pick up your cross, and carry it toward your execution.

Paul understood this: "I affirm, brethren, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily" (1 Corinthians 15:31, NASB).

Daily death. Not just at conversion. Not just in dramatic moments of crisis. Every single day: death to self, death to your agenda, death to your right to run your own life.

This is why Jesus says "take up" your cross—it's an active choice. No one forces the cross on you. You pick it up voluntarily. You choose death. You embrace it. You carry it willingly.

And notice: it's *your* cross. Not someone else's. Jesus has a specific cross for you—a specific way He's calling you to die to yourself. Your cross will look different from someone else's.

For some, the cross is dying to the love of money. For others, it's dying to the need for approval. For others, it's dying to comfort or security or control or independence or the need to be right.

Whatever you're most desperately clinging to—whatever you'd fight hardest to preserve—that's probably where your cross is. That's what you're being called to surrender, to die to, to lose.

And Jesus says: Pick it up. Daily. And follow Me.

The Paradox: Losing to Find

The third requirement is actually a promise wrapped in a paradox:

"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25, NASB).

This is one of the most counterintuitive statements Jesus ever made. It violates every instinct we have. Every fiber of our being screams: "Save your life! Preserve yourself! Protect what's yours!"

But Jesus says the exact opposite: If you try to save your life, you'll lose it. If you lose your life, you'll find it.

The word for "life" here is *psychē*—soul, life, self. It's your very essence, your being, your existence.

Jesus is saying: If you make self-preservation your goal—if you organize your entire existence around protecting yourself, advancing yourself, serving yourself—you will lose your life. You will lose what you're trying to save.

You'll gain the whole world and forfeit your soul (Matthew 16:26). You'll accumulate everything externally while becoming nothing internally. You'll preserve your life and discover it's empty, meaningless, dead.

But if you lose your life—if you give it up, surrender it, let it die—you will find real life. The life that's actually worth living. The abundant life Jesus came to give (John 10:10).

Jesus illustrates this with an image from nature:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal" (John 12:24-25, NASB).

A grain of wheat can do one of two things:

1. **Preserve itself.** Stay safe and dry, avoid the dark soil, refuse to be buried. And in preserving itself, it remains alone. One single grain. Never multiplying. Never producing. Just... alone.
2. **Die.** Fall into the earth, be buried, break open, decompose. And in dying, it produces a harvest. Thirty, sixty, a hundred times what was sown. Life comes from death. Fruitfulness comes from surrender.

This is the great paradox of the gospel: Life comes through death. Gain comes through loss. Finding comes through losing. Resurrection comes through crucifixion.

You cannot have resurrection without death. You cannot have harvest without the seed dying. You cannot have the life Jesus offers while clinging to the life you're trying to preserve.

C.S. Lewis writes: "God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing."

The life you're trying to save—the self you're trying to preserve—apart from surrender to Christ, it's not real life. It's a shadow. An illusion. A grain of wheat sitting alone, convincing itself it's alive while actually just slowly dying in isolation.

Real life—the abundant, eternal, joy-filled life—only comes when you lose your life for Christ's sake. When you let the grain fall into the earth and die. When you stop preserving and start surrendering.

What We Put First Instead

Jesus's call to lose your life is so radical, so contrary to human nature, that we're constantly finding ways to avoid it. We put other things first—things that feel safer, more reasonable, more manageable.

The Rich Young Ruler: Self-Preservation First

We've encountered this man before, but his story perfectly illustrates what happens when self-preservation takes priority over losing your life.

He comes to Jesus asking about eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. The young man claims he's kept them all since his youth. Then Jesus puts the real test before him:

"Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.' But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property" (Matthew 19:21-22, NASB).

Jesus is asking him to lose his life. Not literally die, but surrender everything he's built his life on—his wealth, his security, his status, his identity as a successful young man.

And the young ruler can't do it. He's not willing to lose his life even to gain eternal life. He'd rather preserve what he has than receive what Jesus offers.

Mark's account adds a heartbreaking detail: "Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him" (Mark 10:21, NASB).

Jesus loved him. And because Jesus loved him, He offered him the opportunity to lose his life and find real life. But the young man chose self-preservation instead.

He walked away grieving. He knew he was walking away from something precious. He knew Jesus was offering something better. But he couldn't let go. He couldn't lose his life.

And so he lost it anyway—just in a different way. He saved his possessions but forfeited his soul. He preserved his earthly life but lost eternal life. He protected what he had but missed what he could have received.

How many people make this same choice? Jesus calls them to surrender—to lose their financial security, their comfortable lifestyle, their carefully constructed plans. And they walk away grieving, unwilling to lose what they're desperately trying to save.

They put self-preservation first. And in trying to save their lives, they lose them.

Lot's Wife: The Past Over the Future

When God decides to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, He sends angels to rescue Lot and his family. The instruction is clear:

"Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, and do not stay anywhere in the valley; escape to the mountains, or you will be swept away" (Genesis 19:17, NASB).

Don't look back. Don't stay. Escape. Run. Don't try to preserve anything from your past life.

But Lot's wife can't do it. Genesis records it in one tragic sentence:

"But his wife, from behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19:26, NASB).

She looked back. She couldn't let go. She couldn't lose her life in Sodom—the life she'd built, the home she'd made, the possessions she'd accumulated, the identity she'd formed.

And in trying to hold onto the past, she lost her future. In one moment of refusal to let go, she became a monument to the danger of looking back.

Jesus references her as a warning:

"Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it" (Luke 17:32-33, NASB).

Remember her. Remember what happens when you refuse to let go. When you try to preserve your old life while stepping into the new one. When you look back longingly at what you're being called to leave behind.

You become spiritually frozen. A pillar of salt. Neither fully in the old life nor the new. Stuck between two worlds, belonging to neither.

How many Christians are living as pillars of salt? They've made a decision to follow Jesus, but they keep looking back at their old life. They can't fully let go of who they used to be, what they used to have, how they used to live.

They put the past first. They try to preserve the old life while receiving the new. And they end up frozen—unable to move forward, unable to go back, just stuck.

Jesus calls us to lose our lives—including the life we used to have. You can't follow Him forward while constantly looking backward. You can't embrace the new life while clinging to the old.

Let it go. Let it die. Don't look back. Or you'll become a pillar of salt.

Ananias and Sapphira: Reputation Over Authenticity

The early church was marked by radical generosity. Believers were selling properties and possessions and sharing with anyone who had need (Acts 2:45). Barnabas sold a field and brought the money to the apostles (Acts 4:36-37).

Ananias and Sapphira wanted the reputation of being that generous without the reality of actually surrendering everything:

"But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 5:1-2, NASB).

They sold property. They brought money. But they kept some back while pretending they'd given everything. They wanted to look like Barnabas—fully surrendered, totally generous—while actually preserving something for themselves.

Peter confronts them:

"Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God'" (Acts 5:3-4, NASB).

The sin wasn't keeping some of the money. The sin was lying—pretending to have surrendered everything while actually preserving something for themselves. Wanting the reputation of losing their lives without the reality of actually losing them.

And the judgment is swift and severe. Ananias drops dead. Three hours later, Sapphira comes in, repeats the lie, and dies too.

Why such a harsh response? Because at the very beginning of the church, God was establishing a crucial principle: You cannot fake losing your life. You cannot pretend to have surrendered while secretly preserving. You cannot maintain your reputation for radical discipleship while living in partial obedience.

Either you lose your life or you don't. Either you surrender or you don't. There's no middle ground. No partial death. No pretending.

How many Christians today are like Ananias and Sapphira? We want to look radically committed while keeping significant portions of our lives off limits to God. We want the reputation of being "all in" while actually holding back.

We give generously—but not sacrificially. We serve faithfully—but not in ways that truly cost us. We speak about surrender—but maintain tight control over certain areas of our lives.

We put reputation over authenticity. We try to appear to have lost our lives while secretly preserving them.

And our spiritual lives become performances rather than reality. We're actors playing the role of disciples rather than actually being disciples.

Jesus calls us to authenticity, not performance. Real surrender, not the appearance of it. Actually losing our lives, not just looking like we have.

Why Jesus Prioritizes Losing Your Life

Jesus doesn't call us to lose our lives because He's cruel or because He enjoys watching us suffer. He calls us to this because it's the only path to real life.

Self-Preservation Leads to Spiritual Death

The irony of trying to save your life is that in the attempt to preserve yourself, you actually destroy yourself.

When you make self-preservation your goal, you become:

Anxious. You're constantly worried about protecting what you have, defending your interests, securing your future. Every threat to your security, comfort, or status causes anxiety because your life depends on preserving these things.

Isolated. Real relationship requires vulnerability, which requires risk. But self-preservation avoids risk. So you keep people at arm's length. You never fully open up. You never fully commit. You remain alone—like the grain of wheat that refuses to fall into the ground and die.

Enslaved. Whatever you're desperately trying to preserve ends up owning you. If you're trying to preserve your money, you become enslaved to accumulating and protecting it. If you're trying to preserve your reputation, you become enslaved to managing how people perceive you. The very thing you're trying to save becomes your master.

Spiritually dead. Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it" (Matthew 16:25, NASB). When self-preservation is your goal, you lose the life you're trying to save. You end up spiritually dead—going through the motions, maintaining appearances, but hollow inside.

The Rich Young Ruler walked away grieving because he chose self-preservation. He saved his possessions but lost his soul. He preserved his earthly life but forfeited eternal life.

That's always what happens when you try to save your life. You lose the very thing you're trying to keep.

Death to Self Is the Gateway to Resurrection Life

But here's the glorious flip side: When you lose your life for Christ's sake, you find it. When you let the grain fall into the earth and die, it produces a harvest.

Death to self is not the end. It's the beginning. It's not loss. It's the path to gain.

Jesus modeled this Himself:

"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name" (Philippians 2:5-9, NASB).

Jesus didn't grasp at what was rightfully His. He emptied Himself. He humbled Himself. He died. And *because* He died, God exalted Him to the highest place.

Death led to resurrection. Emptying led to fullness. Humiliation led to exaltation. Loss led to gain.

The same pattern applies to us. When we lose our lives—when we die to self, surrender control, let go of what we're clinging to—we discover resurrection life on the other side.

We discover:

Freedom. When you're no longer desperately trying to preserve yourself, you're free. Free from anxiety because God holds your life. Free from the opinions of others because God's opinion is enough. Free from the tyranny of your own desires because you've surrendered them to Christ.

Joy. Real joy—not happiness dependent on circumstances, but deep joy rooted in God—comes when you're not living for yourself anymore. When your life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3), you discover a joy the world can't give and circumstances can't take away.

Purpose. When you stop trying to make your life count and instead surrender it to God's purposes, you discover the meaning you were searching for. You find that you were created for something far greater than self-preservation—you were created for God's glory and kingdom purposes.

Life. Real life. Abundant life. Eternal life. The life Jesus came to give (John 10:10). Not just existence, but truly *living*—connected to God, bearing fruit that lasts, part of something eternal.

This is why Jesus says, "whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25, NASB). It's not a trick. It's not a cruel paradox designed to confuse us. It's the actual way reality works.

Life comes through death. Always. In every realm. The grain must die to produce a harvest. The caterpillar must die to become a butterfly. The old life must die for the new life to emerge.

You cannot have resurrection without crucifixion. You cannot have new life while clinging to the old. You cannot find your life while desperately trying to save it.

But when you lose it—when you surrender it, die to it, let it go—you find that what emerges on the other side is more alive, more real, more fulfilling than anything you tried to preserve.

True Discipleship Requires Total Surrender

Jesus makes it absolutely clear: You cannot be His disciple without losing your life.

"So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33, NASB).

Not "some of you can be My disciple while keeping some things." Not "you can be My disciple at a discount rate if you're not ready to surrender everything."

None of you can be My disciple who does not give up all.

This is total surrender. Complete loss. Nothing held back. Nothing preserved. Nothing off limits.

William Cowper's hymn captures the heart of this surrender:

"The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be;
Help me to tear it from Thy throne,
And worship only Thee."

Whatever your dearest idol is—whatever you love most, cling to hardest, would fight most desperately to preserve—that's what must be torn from God's throne and surrendered.

Because God will not share His throne with idols. He will not be Lord of your life while you maintain lordship over certain protected areas.

Either He is Lord of all, or He's not Lord at all.

Total surrender doesn't mean God will necessarily take everything from you. Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, and God provided a ram instead (Genesis 22). God often tests our willingness to lose everything but doesn't always require us to actually lose it all.

But the willingness must be real. The surrender must be genuine. You must be willing to lose your life—all of it—for Christ's sake.

And when you are, you discover that surrender isn't loss. It's liberation. It's not death. It's life.

The Way Forward: Losing Your Life Today

So how do we actually live this out? How do we deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and lose our lives for Christ's sake?

Identify What You're Clinging To

Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal what you're desperately trying to preserve. What are you holding onto so tightly that you'd fight to keep it even if God asked you to surrender it?

Is it financial security? Your career? Your reputation? Your relationships? Your plans for the future? Your comfort? Your control? Your right to be right?

Whatever you're unwilling to lose is probably an idol. And that's exactly what you need to surrender.

Make Daily Decisions to Die

"Take up his cross *daily*" (Luke 9:23, NASB, emphasis added). This isn't a one-time event. It's a daily choice.

Every morning, consciously surrender your life to Christ:

"God, this day belongs to You. My plans, my preferences, my agenda—I surrender them. If You call me to something uncomfortable, I'll obey. If You ask me to sacrifice something I want to preserve, I'll let it go. This is Your day, Your life, not mine."

Then throughout the day, practice small deaths:

- Die to your need to be right in an argument
- Die to your preference for comfort when God calls you to serve
- Die to your desire for recognition when God calls you to hidden service
- Die to your craving for control when circumstances spiral beyond your management

Every small death prepares you for bigger ones. Every daily surrender trains you in the life of losing to gain.

Count the Cost, Then Pay It

Jesus warns people not to follow Him impulsively without understanding the cost:

"For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?" (Luke 14:28, NASB).

Count the cost. Be honest about what losing your life will require. Don't pretend it's easy or painless or no big deal.

Following Jesus will cost you everything. It will require dying to yourself. It will demand surrendering things you desperately want to keep.

But also count the gain. What you lose is nothing compared to what you find. What you surrender is temporary; what you receive is eternal.

Jesus is worth it. The life He offers is worth it. The joy, freedom, purpose, and eternal reward are worth every single thing you surrender.

Count the cost. Then pay it. Willingly. Joyfully. Completely.

Stop Looking Back

Don't be Lot's wife. Don't keep glancing back at the life you're being called to leave behind. Don't reminisce about "the good old days" before you followed Jesus. Don't wonder what you're missing by choosing surrender over self-preservation.

Paul demonstrates this: "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:7-8, NASB).

Everything he lost? Rubbish. Garbage. Worthless compared to knowing Christ.

When you're tempted to look back at what you've surrendered, remember what you've gained. When you're tempted to regret what you've lost, remember what you've found.

Christ is better. Always. He's worth more than everything you gave up combined.

Embrace Authenticity Over Reputation

Don't be Ananias and Sapphira. Don't pretend to have surrendered more than you actually have. Don't perform radical discipleship while secretly preserving significant areas of your life.

Be honest about where you're still holding back. Confess it. Bring it into the light. Ask God to help you surrender what you're still clinging to.

Authentic partial surrender is better than fake total surrender. God isn't fooled by performances. He sees your heart. He knows what you're secretly preserving.

And He loves you enough to keep calling you to full surrender. Not to make you miserable, but to give you the life you were created for.

Trust That Death Leads to Life

This is the hardest part: trusting that losing your life actually leads to finding it. Believing that the grain must die to produce fruit. Having faith that resurrection follows crucifixion.

Everything in you will scream that this is crazy. That you're losing what you can never get back. That you're giving up something precious for nothing.

But Jesus promised: "Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25, NASB).

Trust Him. He's not lying. He's not tricking you. He went to the cross Himself. He died before He rose. He lost His life before He found it.

And He's calling you to the same path. Not because it's easy, but because it's the only path to life.

The Grain That Falls

Jesus used the image of a grain of wheat because it's perfect. A grain can preserve itself and remain alone. Or it can fall into the earth, die, and produce a harvest.

Every disciple faces the same choice.

You can try to save your life—protect yourself, preserve what you have, play it safe, avoid the cross. And you'll remain alone. One grain. Never multiplying. Never producing. Just existing until you eventually decay.

Or you can lose your life—surrender it to Christ, die to yourself, let go of everything you're clinging to. And you'll discover that death is the gateway to life. That burial leads to resurrection. That one grain produces thirty, sixty, a hundred times the harvest.

The choice is yours. Jesus won't force you. He'll invite you. He'll call you. He'll show you the cross and say, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me."

But you have to choose. Preserve or surrender. Save or lose. Cling or release.

And the choice determines everything.

Will you remain alone, clinging to the life you're trying to save, slowly dying in isolation?

Or will you fall into the earth, let yourself be buried, die to yourself, and discover that resurrection life waits on the other side?

The grain must fall. The grain must die.

But when it does, it produces a harvest beyond imagination.

Lose your life. You'll find it was never yours to begin with. But what you'll receive in return is life abundant, life eternal, life worth living.

And you'll discover that Jesus was telling the truth all along: The only way to save your life is to lose it.

"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

– Matthew 16:25, NASB

Chapter 9: Count the Cost First

Luke 14:25-33

The Crowd Jesus Didn't Want

Large crowds are following Jesus. From a modern ministry perspective, this looks like success. Thousands of people showing up. Enthusiasm. Momentum. Growing numbers. This is what every church planter dreams of, what every evangelist prays for.

But Jesus looks at the crowd and does something shocking. Instead of capitalizing on the momentum, instead of riding the wave of popularity, instead of making His message more accessible to keep the numbers growing—He deliberately thins the herd.

He turns to the crowd and says the most offensive, repulsive, disciple-discouraging thing imaginable:

"Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them, 'If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple'" (Luke 14:25-26, NASB).

Hate your father and mother? Hate your wife and children? Hate your own life?

This isn't seeker-sensitive. This isn't user-friendly. This isn't designed to grow the crowd. This is designed to shrink it. To separate the merely curious from the truly committed. To make people think twice before they follow.

And Jesus isn't done:

"Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27, NASB).

Carry your cross. The instrument of your own execution. Be willing to die.

Still not finished:

"So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33, NASB).

Give up *all* your possessions. Not some. Not most. *All*.

These are the terms. This is the cost. And Jesus insists that you count it before you follow.

He doesn't want crowds of casual followers. He doesn't want fans. He doesn't want people who are attracted to the miracles, inspired by the teaching, drawn to the movement—but unwilling to pay the price.

He wants disciples. Real disciples. People who know what it costs and choose to pay it anyway.

The Demand to Hate

Let's address the most jarring statement first: "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple."

Is Jesus really commanding us to hate our families? To despise our parents, our spouses, our children?

No. Jesus Himself commanded us to "honor your father and mother" (Matthew 15:4, quoting Exodus 20:12). He condemned the Pharisees for finding loopholes to avoid caring for their elderly parents (Matthew 15:3-6). Paul instructs, "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8, NASB).

So what does Jesus mean by "hate"?

He's using hyperbole—deliberate exaggeration to make a point. The word "hate" (*miseō*) is being used in a comparative sense. Matthew's account of similar teaching makes this clearer:

"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:37, NASB).

It's about comparative love. Your love for Jesus must be so supreme, so overwhelming, so all-consuming that every other love—even legitimate, good loves like family—looks like hatred in comparison.

If you have to choose between Jesus and family, you choose Jesus. If your family demands you compromise your faith, you stand with Jesus. If following Christ costs you your relationships—even the most precious ones—you follow anyway.

This isn't about being mean to your family or abandoning your responsibilities. It's about priority. Jesus comes first. Before everyone. Before everything.

Even before your own life.

"Yes, and even his own life." Your natural instinct for self-preservation, your desire to protect and promote yourself, your agenda for your own life—all of it must be subordinated to Christ. Your love for yourself must pale in comparison to your love for Him.

This is the first cost to count: Following Jesus may cost you your relationships. It may cost you family approval. It may cost you the life you imagined for yourself.

Are you willing to pay that price?

The Parables of Counting the Cost

After making these radical demands, Jesus tells two brief parables to drive home the importance of counting the cost before you commit:

"For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish'" (Luke 14:28-30, NASB).

First parable: The tower builder. You wouldn't start a construction project without first figuring out if you can afford to complete it. If you start building and run out of money halfway through, you become a laughingstock. An unfinished tower is a monument to poor planning and foolish presumption.

Following Jesus is like building a tower. You need to calculate the cost upfront. Can you afford to finish? Can you go all the way? Or are you going to start with enthusiasm and abandon the project when it gets difficult?

Second parable:

"Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace" (Luke 14:31-32, NASB).

A king going to war doesn't just charge into battle on impulse. He assesses: Do I have enough troops? Can I win this fight? What are my chances?

If he can't win, he negotiates peace while there's still time. Better to make terms than to engage in a battle you'll lose.

Following Jesus is like going to war. There's an enemy—Satan, the world, your own flesh. There's a fight. And you need to count the cost: Am I ready for this battle? Am I willing to fight to the end? Or should I not start what I can't finish?

Notice what Jesus is *not* saying. He's not saying, "Don't follow Me." He's not saying, "The cost is too high." He's saying, "Know what you're getting into. Understand the price. Make an informed decision."

He doesn't want people who follow impulsively and quit when it gets hard. He doesn't want half-finished towers. He doesn't want soldiers who desert when the battle intensifies.

He wants people who count the cost, understand what's required, and commit anyway.

Then comes the conclusion:

"So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33, NASB).

None of you. Not "most of you." Not "the super-committed among you." *None.*

You cannot be Jesus's disciple—period—unless you give up all your possessions. Everything you own. Everything you're counting on. Everything you're clinging to.

This is the cost. Count it. Understand it. Then decide.

What People Put First Instead

Jesus's demand to count the cost and give up everything is so radical that people are constantly finding ways to avoid it. They put other things first—things that seem more reasonable, more manageable, less costly.

The Seed Among Thorns: Wealth and Worry Over Discipleship

In the parable of the sower, Jesus describes four types of soil representing four responses to the gospel. The third type is particularly relevant to counting the cost:

"And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Mark 4:18-19, NASB).

These people hear the word. They receive it. They start growing. But the worries of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and desires for other things choke out the word and make it unfruitful.

They didn't count the cost. They didn't realize that following Jesus would require giving up their pursuit of wealth, their anxiety about material security, their desire for all the things the world offers.

They thought they could have Jesus *and* their wealth. Jesus *and* their worry-driven pursuit of financial security. Jesus *and* all the other things they desire.

But you can't. Jesus said you can't serve God and wealth (Matthew 6:24). You have to choose. And the seed among thorns chose wealth and worry. They put financial security and material accumulation ahead of discipleship.

And the word became unfruitful in their lives. Not because God abandoned them. But because they couldn't give up what discipleship required them to surrender.

Matthew's version adds a crucial detail: "the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Matthew 13:22, NASB).

Deceitfulness of wealth. Riches are deceptive. They promise security but deliver anxiety. They promise satisfaction but produce insatiable desire for more. They promise freedom but enslave you to their pursuit and protection.

The seed among thorns didn't count the cost of discipleship, but they also didn't count the cost of wealth. They didn't realize that pursuing riches would cost them fruitfulness, cost them intimacy with God, cost them the abundant life Jesus offers.

They traded the eternal for the temporary. The valuable for the worthless. The kingdom of God for the kingdoms of this world.

And they ended up with nothing. Unfruitful. Choked. Spiritually suffocated by the very things they thought they needed.

How many people today are making the same trade? They hear the gospel. They're attracted to Jesus. They even start following. But when discipleship conflicts with career advancement, when obedience threatens financial security, when following Jesus means giving up the lifestyle they've worked so hard to build—they choose wealth and worry.

They put financial security first. Material comfort first. Economic advancement first.

And the word becomes unfruitful in their lives.

Demas: Comfort Over Commitment

Paul mentions Demas three times in his letters, and the progression is tragic.

First mention, in Colossians: "Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas" (Colossians 4:14, NASB). Demas is Paul's fellow worker, part of the ministry team.

Second mention, in Philemon: "as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers" (Philemon 1:24, NASB). Still there. Still serving. Still committed.

Third mention, in 2 Timothy: "for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica" (2 Timothy 4:10, NASB).

Gone. Deserted. Why? "Having loved this present world."

Demas didn't count the cost. Or rather, he counted it but decided the price was too high. Ministry with Paul meant hardship, persecution, imprisonment, danger. And Demas wanted comfort more than he wanted commitment.

He put this present world—its safety, its pleasures, its comforts—ahead of costly discipleship. And he walked away.

Paul doesn't elaborate on what specific aspect of "this present world" Demas loved. Was it physical comfort? Family obligations? Financial security? The desire to avoid persecution? We don't know.

What we do know is that Demas had been all in. He was serving alongside Paul. He was in the arena. And then he left. Because the cost became too high and the world's attractions too strong.

This is what happens when you don't count the cost upfront. You start strong. You're enthusiastic. You're committed—at least when commitment doesn't require significant sacrifice.

But when the cost becomes real—when following Jesus means actual hardship, genuine persecution, measurable loss—you discover you never really settled the question of whether you were willing to pay the price.

And you desert. Not necessarily dramatically. Not always publicly. Sometimes you just drift away. You're still around, still technically "in," but your heart has gone to Thessalonica. Back to comfort. Back to this present world.

How many Demases are sitting in churches today? People who started well. Who were once committed. Who served faithfully. But who have quietly decided that the cost of genuine discipleship is too high.

They haven't left the church. They haven't renounced the faith. They've just made a thousand small compromises, each one prioritizing comfort over commitment, until they're Christians in name only.

They put ease over obedience. Convenience over cross-carrying. Comfort over costly discipleship.

And like Demas, they desert—not always physically, but always spiritually.

Those Who Turned Back: Easy Answers Over Hard Truth

John 6 records one of the most dramatic moments in Jesus's ministry. After feeding five thousand people, after teaching about being the bread of life, Jesus makes statements His followers find offensive:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves" (John 6:53, NASB).

Hard teaching. Difficult to understand. Seemingly offensive. The kind of teaching that requires faith, that demands wrestling, that doesn't provide easy answers.

And the response?

"As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore" (John 6:66, NASB).

Not just curious onlookers. Not just casual followers. *Disciples*. People who had been following Jesus, learning from Him, identifying as His students. And they left.

Why? Because the teaching was too hard. Too difficult. Too demanding. They wanted easy answers, simple teachings, comfortable truths. And Jesus gave them something that challenged, confused, and offended them.

So they walked away.

Jesus turns to the twelve: "You do not want to go away also, do you?" (John 6:67, NASB).

It's not a desperate plea. It's a genuine question. The door is open. They can leave too if they want. Jesus isn't lowering the bar to keep them. He's not softening the teaching to make it more palatable. He's letting them know: This is what following Me looks like. Hard truths. Difficult teachings. Demands that don't always make immediate sense.

Peter's response is telling:

"Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God'" (John 6:68-69, NASB).

"To whom shall we go?" Not "We fully understand everything You're teaching." Not "This makes perfect sense to us now." But "Where else would we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Peter had counted the cost. Not perfectly. Not comprehensively—he'd later deny Jesus three times. But fundamentally, he'd settled the question: Following Jesus is worth it, even when it's hard. Even when the teaching is difficult. Even when I don't understand.

The disciples who turned back hadn't counted that cost. They wanted Jesus on their terms. They wanted inspiration without transformation. They wanted the miracles without the hard teachings. They wanted a Messiah who made life easier, not one who made demands they couldn't immediately comprehend.

They put easy answers first. Comfortable truths first. A Jesus who fit their expectations first. And when the real Jesus didn't match their preferences, they left.

How many people today do the same thing? They're attracted to Jesus when He's the good shepherd, the loving savior, the friend of sinners. But when He makes hard demands—when He calls them to radical obedience, costly sacrifice, difficult truth—they turn back.

They want Christianity on their terms. A gospel that doesn't demand too much. A Jesus who affirms their lifestyle choices and asks nothing difficult in return.

And when they encounter the real Jesus—the one who says "take up your cross," "give up all your possessions," "hate even your own life"—they quietly withdraw.

They put their preferences first. Their comfort first. Their version of Jesus first.

And they never become true disciples.

Why Jesus Prioritizes Counting the Cost

Jesus insists that we count the cost before following Him. Not to discourage us. Not to make discipleship seem impossible. But because honest assessment upfront prevents catastrophic failure later.

Half-Hearted Commitment Leads to Spiritual Failure

The tower builder who doesn't count the cost doesn't just end up with an unfinished tower. He ends up with public ridicule. "This man began to build and was not able to finish."

The king who goes to war without assessing his strength doesn't just lose the battle. He potentially loses his kingdom, his army, his life.

Half-hearted commitment is worse than no commitment at all. It creates the illusion of discipleship without the reality. It makes promises it can't keep. It starts what it can't finish.

Jesus would rather you not start than start and quit. Better to count the cost and say "I'm not ready" than to make commitments you'll abandon when they become inconvenient.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian martyred by the Nazis, understood this perfectly:

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

Then he contrasts it with costly grace:

"Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him."

Cheap grace says you can have Jesus without cost. You can be saved without surrender. You can call Him Lord without obeying Him. You can be His disciple while keeping all your possessions, pursuing all your ambitions, maintaining all your old priorities.

But that's not grace. That's self-deception. And it leads to spiritual failure.

True grace is costly. Not because you earn it—grace by definition is free. But because receiving it costs you everything. It costs Jesus everything to provide it. And it costs you everything to receive it.

When you truly count the cost of discipleship, you realize there is no half-way. You can't partially follow Jesus. You can't be sort-of His disciple. You can't give Him most of your possessions while keeping the rest.

It's all or nothing. And half-hearted commitment—trying to split the difference—leads to inevitable failure.

Honest Assessment Prevents False Professions

Jesus wants informed followers, not deceived ones. He wants people who know what they're signing up for, not people who make impulsive commitments based on incomplete information.

The seed among thorns made a profession of faith. They received the word. But they didn't count the cost of what that word would require them to give up. So when wealth and worry came into conflict with discipleship, they chose wealth and worry.

Demas made a profession of commitment. He was Paul's fellow worker. But he didn't count the cost of sustained ministry through hardship. So when this present world looked more attractive than costly service, he deserted.

The disciples who turned back made a profession of following. They were with Jesus, learning from Him, identifying as disciples. But they didn't count the cost of hard teaching and difficult truth. So when Jesus didn't match their expectations, they left.

All three are examples of false professions. Not necessarily insincere at the moment they were made. But uninformed. Based on partial understanding. Made without counting the actual cost.

And all three led to eventual abandonment of the faith.

Jesus doesn't want that for people. He doesn't want you to make a profession today that you'll abandon tomorrow. He doesn't want you to start following with enthusiasm only to turn back in disappointment when you encounter the real cost.

So He makes the cost clear upfront. He doesn't hide it. He doesn't minimize it. He doesn't use bait-and-switch tactics where He gets you committed and then reveals what it actually costs.

He says: "Here's the price. Count it. Understand it. Make an informed decision."

This is love. Honest, clear, truthful love that respects you enough to tell you the truth about what you're getting into.

False teachers minimize the cost. They promise blessings without sacrifice. They offer cheap grace. They fill stadiums with people who think they're following Jesus but have never counted the cost and made an informed commitment.

Jesus does the opposite. He thins the crowd. He makes the cost clear. He insists you count it before you follow.

Because He wants real disciples, not false professors.

True Discipleship Requires Informed Surrender

You cannot truly surrender what you haven't first honestly assessed.

If you don't count the cost—if you don't take inventory of everything discipleship will require you to give up—your surrender will be incomplete. You'll hold back parts of your life you haven't consciously considered. You'll discover later that there are areas you never really submitted to Christ's lordship because you never counted the cost of surrendering them.

Counting the cost forces you to look at everything. Your relationships. Your possessions. Your career. Your plans. Your dreams. Your money. Your time. Your reputation. Your comfort. Your life itself.

And it forces you to ask: Am I willing to surrender this if Jesus asks me to?

Not hypothetically. Not "I'll deal with it when I get there." But actually: If Jesus called me tomorrow to give this up for His sake, would I do it?

If the answer is no—if there are things you know you're not willing to surrender—you haven't counted the cost. And you're not ready to be His disciple.

This is why Jesus says "none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions." He's not saying everyone will be called to literal poverty. He's saying everyone must be willing to give up everything. Nothing can be off-limits. Nothing can be in a protected category marked "Jesus can't touch this."

Informed surrender means you've inventoried everything you have and consciously placed it all on the altar. You've said, "It's all Yours, Lord. My family, my money, my career, my plans, my comfort, my life—all of it belongs to You. I'm holding it with an open hand, ready to release it whenever and however You ask."

That's what it means to count the cost and choose to pay it.

The Way Forward: Counting the Cost Today

So how do we actually do this? How do we count the cost of discipleship and make an informed decision to follow Jesus?

Take Inventory of Everything You Have

Literally make a list. What do you possess? What are you counting on? What would be hardest to give up if Jesus asked you to?

Material possessions. Relationships. Career. Reputation. Comfort. Security. Plans for the future. Dreams and ambitions.

Write it all down. Everything you have. Everything you value. Everything you're clinging to.

This isn't morbid or negative. It's honest. You can't surrender what you haven't first acknowledged.

Ask the Hard Question About Each Item

For each thing on your list, ask: "If Jesus asked me to give this up for His sake, would I?"

Not "would it be hard?" Of course it would be hard. Not "would I be sad?" Probably. But: "Would I do it?"

Would you give up your career if Jesus called you to missions in a place where your degree is worthless?

Would you give up your house if Jesus called you to radical generosity or to relocate for ministry?

Would you give up your plan for your kids' futures if Jesus called you to something that would disrupt their stability and opportunities?

Would you give up your reputation if following Jesus meant being labeled a fanatic or fool?

Be honest. If the answer to any of these is "no," you haven't counted the cost. You're not ready to be His disciple.

Not because you lack perfect willingness—we all struggle. But because you haven't consciously faced the question and settled it.

Count the Cost of Not Following

Here's what we often miss: There's also a cost to not following Jesus. A cost to keeping your possessions. A cost to prioritizing comfort over commitment. A cost to choosing this present world over eternal life.

Jesus asks, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26, NASB).

You can gain everything—all the possessions, all the comfort, all the security, all the success—and lose your soul. Is that a good trade?

Jim Elliot, the missionary martyred in Ecuador at age 28, wrote in his journal: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

What can you not keep? Everything. Your possessions, your relationships, your reputation, your life—all temporary. All leaving your hands eventually whether you give them up or not.

What can you not lose? Eternal life. Treasure in heaven. Relationship with God. The abundant life Jesus offers. Rewards that last forever.

The real fool is the person who clutches temporary treasures and forfeits eternal ones. Who saves their life and loses their soul. Who keeps their possessions and loses the kingdom.

Count both costs: the cost of following *and* the cost of not following. Then decide which price you're willing to pay.

Make an Informed Decision

After you've counted the cost honestly, make a decision. Not an emotional decision in the heat of a worship service. Not an impulsive commitment based on incomplete information. An informed, considered, eyes-wide-open decision.

Either:

"I'm all in. I've counted the cost, and Jesus is worth it. I'm willing to give up everything for His sake. I'm ready to be His disciple, whatever it costs."

Or:

"I'm not ready. I've counted the cost, and there are things I'm not willing to surrender. I need more time. I need to wrestle with this more. I'm honest about where I am."

Jesus would rather you make the second confession honestly than the first one falsely. He doesn't want fake disciples. He wants real ones who've counted the cost and chosen to pay it.

Build With the End in View

If you decide to follow Jesus—if you count the cost and choose to pay it—then commit to finishing what you start.

Don't be the tower builder who runs out of resources halfway through. Don't be the king who engages in battle without enough troops to win.

Build with the end in view. Follow with endurance in mind. Commit for the long haul.

This means:

Develop spiritual disciplines now that will sustain you through future hardship. Prayer, Bible study, worship, fellowship, service—these aren't optional extras. They're the resources you'll need to finish the tower.

Surround yourself with people who are also counting the cost and choosing to pay it. You can't sustain costly discipleship in isolation or surrounded by people pursuing cheap grace.

Keep rehearsing why Jesus is worth it. When the cost becomes painfully real—when you're actually called to give up something precious—you'll need to remember why you're doing this. Keep the end goal in view.

Expect suffering. Don't be surprised when discipleship costs you. Jesus promised it would. "In the world you have tribulation" (John 16:33, NASB). Count that as part of the cost and press on anyway.

Renew Your Commitment Regularly

Counting the cost isn't just a one-time decision at the beginning. It's an ongoing practice.

As you mature in faith, you'll discover new areas that need surrendering. New possessions that have become idols. New relationships that are competing with Christ. New plans that need submitting to His lordship.

Each time, count the cost. Ask the hard question. Make the informed decision. Choose surrender over self-preservation.

This is what Luke 9:23 means: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross *daily* and follow Me" (emphasis added).

Daily. Every day, you count the cost again. Every day, you recommit. Every day, you choose Jesus over everything else.

The Only Thing Worth Giving Everything For

Here's the truth Jesus wants you to understand: He is worth the cost.

Everything you give up for Him is nothing compared to what you gain. Every possession you surrender, He replaces with something better. Every relationship you subordinate to Him, He enriches. Every plan you release, He fulfills with something more satisfying than you could have imagined.

This isn't prosperity gospel. You might not get material wealth. You might experience suffering. You might lose things you treasure.

But you gain Christ. And Christ is better than everything.

Paul understood this: "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the

surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:7-8, NASB).

Everything he gave up? Loss. Rubbish. Garbage. Compared to knowing Christ.

That's the calculation you make when you count the cost: Is Christ worth more than everything I'm giving up?

And the answer—when you truly see who He is, what He's done, what He offers—is always yes.

Yes, He's worth more than possessions.

Yes, He's worth more than comfort.

Yes, He's worth more than security.

Yes, He's worth more than reputation.

Yes, He's worth more than my plans, my dreams, my life itself.

Not because the things we give up are worthless. Many of them are good things. But because Christ is infinitely better.

The Tower Worth Building

Jesus asks, "Which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it?"

Here's what He's not saying: "The tower isn't worth building." Or: "You don't have enough to complete it."

He's saying: Count the cost. Understand what's required. Then build the tower knowing you have what it takes to finish.

And what do you have? You have Christ. You have His grace. You have His Spirit. You have His promises. You have His power.

The cost is high. All your possessions. Your whole life. Everything you have.

But you have enough to finish. Not because your resources are sufficient. But because His are.

When you count the cost and choose to follow Jesus, you're not relying on your ability to sustain yourself through to the end. You're relying on His ability to sustain you.

"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy" (Jude 1:24, NASB).

He is able to keep you. He is able to help you finish. He is able to bring you all the way home.

So count the cost. Be honest about what discipleship requires. Don't minimize it. Don't pretend it's easy.

But also count what you gain: Christ Himself, eternal life, treasure in heaven, the abundant life, the joy of knowing you invested everything in the only thing that lasts forever.

Then build the tower. Fight the battle. Finish the race.

Because Jesus is worth it. He's worth everything.

And giving Him everything is the only way to gain what you cannot lose.

"So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions."

– Luke 14:33, NASB

PART FIVE: THE ORDER OF RESTORATION

Chapter 10: First Clean the Inside

Matthew 23:25-26

The Devastating Sermon

Matthew 23 is the most scathing, blistering, unrelenting sermon Jesus ever preached. It's not directed at prostitutes or tax collectors or obvious sinners. It's aimed directly at the religious leaders—the pastors, theologians, and Bible teachers of His day. The ones who looked most spiritual. The ones everyone admired for their devotion.

Seven times Jesus pronounces "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" Seven denunciations. Seven indictments. Seven proclamations of coming judgment.

And right in the middle of this devastating sermon, Jesus uses a metaphor that cuts to the heart of religious pretense:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also" (Matthew 23:25-26, NASB).

Picture it. A cup that's polished to a shine on the outside. Gleaming. Spotless. Beautiful to look at. But pick it up, look inside, and it's filthy. Crusted with old food. Contaminated with greed and self-indulgence.

Would you drink from that cup? Of course not. The clean exterior is worthless if the interior is polluted. In fact, the clean outside is deceptive—it makes you think the cup is safe when it's actually toxic.

This is the Pharisees. This is religious hypocrisy. This is what happens when you prioritize external conformity over internal transformation.

And Jesus says: You've got the order backwards. *First* clean the inside. *Then* the outside will become clean.

Not: Clean the outside and hope the inside follows. Not: Focus on external behavior and trust that will produce internal change. Not: Look good on the surface and ignore what's happening in your heart.

First the inside. The heart. The hidden reality. The part only God sees.

Because what's inside always determines what's outside. Heart change produces behavior change. Internal transformation creates external conformity. But trying to change the outside without addressing the inside is like washing a cup without cleaning the interior—it looks good but remains contaminated.

The Hypocrisy Jesus Exposes

Jesus doesn't stop with the cup metaphor. He presses further, exposing layer after layer of religious pretense:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:27-28, NASB).

Another image. Whitewashed tombs. In Jesus's day, tombs were painted white so people could see them and avoid touching them (which would make them ceremonially unclean). So the tombs looked clean, bright, attractive from the outside. But inside? Death. Decay. Bones. Uncleanness.

The Pharisees looked righteous outwardly. They kept the external regulations meticulously. They washed their hands according to tradition. They tithed down to the smallest herb. They wore their phylacteries and enlarged the tassels on their robes. They prayed publicly. They fasted visibly.

But inside? "Full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

The very people who appeared most devoted to God's law were, internally, living in violation of everything the law actually required. They were whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside, full of death on the inside.

And Jesus says: You've got the order wrong. You're cleaning the outside while leaving the inside filthy. And it doesn't work. It never works.

Because God doesn't judge by external appearance. God judges the heart.

"But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart'" (1 Samuel 16:7, NASB).

Man looks at the outside. God looks at the inside. You can fool people with a clean exterior. You can never fool God.

The Pharisees had mastered the art of looking righteous while being corrupt. Looking holy while being hypocritical. Looking devoted while being lawless.

And Jesus exposes it all. Publicly. Devastatingly. Because He loves them too much to let them continue in their self-deception.

What People Put First Instead

The Pharisees aren't unique. Throughout Scripture—and throughout church history—people have made the same mistake. They've prioritized external religion over internal reality. Appearance over authenticity. Looking good over actually being good.

The Pharisees: External Religion Over Internal Reality

We've already seen Jesus's indictment, but let's look more closely at the specific ways the Pharisees prioritized the outside over the inside.

Ritual purity over heart purity:

"Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.' And He answered and said to them, 'Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?'" (Matthew 15:1-3, NASB).

They were obsessed with washing hands, ceremonial cleanliness, external rituals. But they violated the actual commandments—like honoring father and mother—through their traditions.

External ritual. Internal rebellion. Clean hands. Corrupt hearts.

Tithing minutiae over justice and mercy:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23, NASB).

They counted out individual seeds to make sure they tithed precisely. Meanwhile, they neglected justice, mercy, faithfulness—the actual heart of what God requires.

Perfect external compliance with tithing laws. Complete internal failure to love God and love people.

Public displays of piety without private devotion:

"When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full" (Matthew 6:5, NASB).

They prayed publicly to be seen. They made long prayers to appear spiritual. They wore special religious garments to signal their devotion.

But it was all performance. External religion designed to impress people, not genuine devotion to God. They had the outside right—the words, the posture, the appearance of prayer. But the inside was empty. No real communication with God. No actual heart connection.

Outward righteousness concealing inward corruption:

"For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matthew 23:27, NASB).

This is the comprehensive indictment. Everything on the outside said "righteous." Everything on the inside screamed "corrupt."

They looked like spiritual giants. They were spiritual corpses.

They appeared to be close to God. They were far from Him.

They seemed to be leading people to righteousness. They were actually leading them away from it.

External religion without internal reality. It's the most dangerous form of spiritual deception because it deceives both the person practicing it and everyone observing them.

The Pharisees genuinely believed they were righteous. They weren't trying to be hypocrites. They thought their external conformity proved their internal devotion. They measured spirituality by visible metrics—how long they prayed, how much they gave, how meticulously they followed rules.

And they completely missed that God wanted their hearts, not just their compliance. Their love, not just their performance. Their transformation, not just their tradition.

Simon the Sorcerer: Power Without Purity

In Acts 8, we meet Simon, a sorcerer in Samaria who amazes people with his magic. When Philip comes preaching the gospel, Simon believes and is baptized.

But then Peter and John arrive, pray for believers to receive the Holy Spirit, and lay hands on them. And something in Simon reveals that his "conversion" was external only:

"Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, 'Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' But Peter said to him, 'May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity'" (Acts 8:18-23, NASB).

Simon wanted the power. The external manifestation. The visible results. The ability to do impressive spiritual things that would maintain his reputation and influence.

But his heart wasn't right before God. He was "in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity." His external profession—believing and being baptized—hadn't been accompanied by internal transformation.

He put power before purity. External spiritual performance before internal heart change. The appearance of being part of the kingdom before actually being transformed by the King.

And Peter's diagnosis is devastating: "You have no part or portion in this matter."

You can profess faith. You can be baptized. You can associate with believers. You can even see the Holy Spirit working. But if your heart isn't right before God, you have no part in it. The external actions mean nothing if the internal reality is missing.

How many "converts" are like Simon? They make external professions. They go through religious rituals. They want the benefits, the community, the spiritual experiences. But their hearts have never been transformed. They've cleaned the outside of the cup while leaving the inside full of bitterness and iniquity.

The Laodicean Church: Appearance Over Authenticity

In Revelation 3, Jesus addresses the church at Laodicea. And His assessment is brutal:

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see" (Revelation 3:15-18, NASB).

The Laodiceans thought they had it all together. "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing."

They looked successful. Prosperous. Self-sufficient. They had the external markers of blessing and divine favor.

But Jesus sees the internal reality: "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked."

What they thought was wealth was actually poverty. What they thought was clothing was actually nakedness. What they thought was sight was actually blindness.

They had the appearance of a thriving church. The reality was spiritual destitution.

They put appearance first. Looking successful. Seeming blessed. Appearing to need nothing. And in their self-satisfaction, they missed their actual desperate condition.

This is perhaps the most tragic form of prioritizing the outside over the inside—when you're so convinced by your own external success that you can't see your internal poverty. When you're so deceived by appearances that you don't know you're wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.

The Pharisees had their external religion. Simon had his external profession. The Laodiceans had their external success.

But all of them lacked the one thing that actually matters: internal transformation. A clean heart. Right standing before God. Genuine relationship with Christ.

Why Jesus Prioritizes Internal Transformation

Jesus insists on cleaning the inside first because He understands something we constantly forget: The inside determines the outside. Always. Inevitably. Without exception.

External Conformity Without Internal Transformation Is Hypocrisy

The word "hypocrite" originally referred to an actor wearing a mask. Someone playing a role. Pretending to be someone they're not.

When you clean the outside without cleaning the inside, you're an actor. A performer. Someone whose external appearance doesn't match internal reality.

And Jesus hates hypocrisy. Not because He's harsh or judgmental, but because hypocrisy is fundamentally dishonest. It's lying—to others, to yourself, and to God.

The Pharisees looked righteous but were lawless. That's hypocrisy.

Simon looked converted but was still in bondage to iniquity. That's hypocrisy.

The Laodiceans looked rich but were actually poor. That's hypocrisy.

And hypocrisy doesn't just harm the hypocrite. It harms everyone who observes it. It creates a false standard of spirituality. It makes people think external performance is what God requires. It misleads seekers about what genuine Christianity looks like.

Jesus was so harsh with the Pharisees not just because they were hypocrites, but because their hypocrisy was creating other hypocrites:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves" (Matthew 23:15, NASB).

Their external religion without internal reality was contagious. They were reproducing their own disease. Creating more whitewashed tombs. More cups clean on the outside but filthy on the inside.

A.W. Tozer understood this: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."

Not what we say about God. Not how we perform for God. Not what religious activities we engage in. What comes into our minds—our actual thoughts, our real beliefs, our genuine understanding—when we think about God.

Because that's the inside of the cup. That's the heart. That's what actually matters.

You can have all the external religion right and still have completely wrong thoughts about God. You can look spiritual while having a fundamentally distorted view of who God is and what He requires.

And Jesus says: *First* clean the inside. Get your understanding of God right. Get your heart right. Get your internal reality aligned with truth.

Then the outside will follow.

Heart Change Produces Lasting Behavioral Change

Here's the revolutionary truth: When you clean the inside first, the outside becomes clean too. Not through striving. Not through willpower. Not through religious performance. Naturally. Inevitably. As the overflow of internal transformation.

Jesus says it explicitly: "first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, *so that the outside of it may become clean also*" (Matthew 23:26, NASB).

Clean the inside. The outside follows.

Why? Because behavior flows from the heart. What you do externally is always the fruit of what's happening internally.

"The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart" (Luke 6:45, NASB).

Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. Out of the treasure stored in the heart, behavior emerges. The outside reflects the inside.

This is why external behavioral modification doesn't work long-term. You can white-knuckle your way to better behavior for a while. You can force yourself to follow the rules through sheer willpower. But unless your heart changes, you'll eventually revert. Because the inside hasn't been cleaned.

But when the inside changes—when your heart is transformed, when you genuinely love God and treasure Christ—the external behavior follows naturally.

You don't have to force yourself to pray when you genuinely love talking to God. You don't have to guilt yourself into reading Scripture when you treasure God's Word. You don't have to manipulate yourself into generosity when your heart has been captured by God's generosity toward you.

The behavior flows from the heart. Clean the heart, and the behavior changes. Try to change the behavior without changing the heart, and you create religious performers who look good but are internally corrupt.

Tim Keller writes: "The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart."

You can address a thousand behavioral problems, but until you address the heart problem, nothing changes permanently. The heart is the source. The spring from which all the streams flow. Clean the spring, and the streams run pure. Leave the spring polluted, and no amount of filtering the streams will help.

God Sees and Judges the Heart

Finally, Jesus prioritizes internal transformation because that's what God cares about. God isn't impressed by external religion. He sees past the performance to the reality beneath.

"But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart'" (1 Samuel 16:7, NASB).

Man looks at the outward appearance. We're easily fooled by externals. We judge by what we can see—how people dress, how they speak, what religious activities they engage in, how impressive their ministry is.

But God looks at the heart. He's not fooled by whitewashed tombs. He's not impressed by cups that are clean only on the outside. He sees the internal reality, and that's what He judges.

The Pharisees looked righteous to everyone around them. People admired them, respected them, tried to emulate them. But God saw their hearts and pronounced them hypocrites.

Simon looked like a convert to everyone in Samaria. But Peter, speaking by the Spirit, saw that his heart wasn't right before God.

The Laodiceans thought they were rich and prosperous. But Jesus saw they were wretched and miserable and poor.

External appearance means nothing to God. Internal reality means everything.

This is both terrifying and liberating.

Terrifying because you can't hide. You can't fool God with religious performance. You can't dress up your outside and hope He doesn't notice your inside. He sees everything. Knows everything. Judges everything.

Liberating because you can stop performing. You can stop pretending. You can stop exhausting yourself trying to look spiritual when you feel spiritually bankrupt. Because God already sees the truth, and He's still inviting you to come, to be clean, to be transformed.

The Way Forward: First Cleaning the Inside Today

So how do we actually do this? How do we prioritize internal transformation over external conformity? How do we clean the inside first?

Invite God to Search Your Heart

Start with honest self-examination. Not the kind where you compare yourself to others and conclude you're doing fine. The kind where you let God expose what's really going on inside.

David's prayer should become your regular practice:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way" (Psalm 139:23-24, NASB).

"Search me, God. I can't see my own heart clearly. I'm too good at self-deception. I'm too skilled at justifying myself. You search me. You show me what's really there."

This is a dangerous prayer. God will answer it. And He'll show you things you'd rather not see—pride you didn't know was there, idols you didn't realize you were serving, sin you've been excusing, motivations you've been disguising as spiritual.

But you can't clean what you won't acknowledge. You can't change what you won't see. So invite God to search you. Regularly. Ruthlessly. Completely.

Confess the Gap Between Appearance and Reality

Be honest about the disconnect between how you look externally and what's happening internally. Where is your cup clean on the outside but filthy on the inside?

Maybe you look generous, but your heart is full of greed and you're only giving to maintain appearances.

Maybe you look spiritual, but you're just performing religious rituals without any real love for God.

Maybe you look joyful, but inside you're bitter, resentful, angry.

Maybe you look committed to ministry, but you're actually driven by the need for approval and recognition.

Confess the gap. Name it. Bring it into the light. Stop pretending the outside reflects the inside.

This is what 1 John 1:9 promises: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (NASB).

Confess—agree with God about what's really going on. And He'll cleanse. Not just the outside. The inside. Where it actually matters.

Focus on Heart Issues, Not Just Behavior Modification

When you're addressing sin in your life, go deeper than the behavior. Ask: What heart issue is producing this behavior?

If you struggle with gossip, don't just try to stop gossiping. Ask: What's in my heart that makes me want to tear others down? Insecurity? Pride? The need to feel superior?

If you struggle with anxiety, don't just try to worry less. Ask: What am I trusting more than God? What am I treasuring more than Him? What's exposing my lack of faith?

If you struggle with anger, don't just try to be nicer. Ask: What's underneath the anger? Hurt? Control? Unmet expectations? The belief that I know better than God how things should go?

Address the heart issue, and the behavioral issue will follow. Just modify the behavior without changing the heart, and you'll either fail or become a Pharisee—looking good on the outside while remaining corrupt on the inside.

Pursue Authentic Relationship With God, Not Just Religious Activity

God doesn't want your performance. He wants your heart. He doesn't want your religious activities divorced from relationship. He wants genuine communion with you.

Jesus said to the Pharisees: "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice'" (Matthew 9:13, NASB, quoting Hosea 6:6).

Not sacrifice. Compassion. Not external religion. Internal reality. Not performance. Heart.

So stop treating your relationship with God like a checklist of religious activities to complete. Prayer isn't a box to check. Bible reading isn't a quota to fill. Worship isn't a performance to perfect.

These are means to relationship. Pathways to knowing God. Opportunities to encounter Him and be transformed by Him.

Spend time with God not to look spiritual but to actually commune with Him. Pray not to maintain your religious image but to talk to the One who loves you. Read Scripture not to accumulate knowledge but to hear His voice.

Pursue the relationship. The rest will follow.

Value What God Values

Stop measuring your spirituality by external metrics that impress people. Start measuring it by internal realities that matter to God.

People are impressed by:

- How long you pray publicly
- How much you give (when they know about it)
- How many Bible verses you can quote
- How busy you are with religious activities
- How many people follow you or attend your church

God cares about:

- Whether you genuinely love Him
- Whether your heart is being transformed
- Whether you're growing in humility, patience, kindness, self-control
- Whether you're actually obeying what you claim to believe
- Whether your private life matches your public persona

Stop chasing external validation. Start pursuing internal transformation. Because that's what God sees, and that's what He judges.

Let the Inside Transform the Outside

As your heart changes, let it naturally produce external change. Don't force external conformity. Let it flow from internal transformation.

If God is transforming your heart toward generosity, your giving will change. Not because you're forcing yourself to give more, but because your heart has been captured by God's generosity and you want to give.

If God is transforming your heart toward humility, your relationships will change. Not because you're trying to look humble, but because you actually are becoming humble.

If God is transforming your heart toward holiness, your behavior will change. Not through white-knuckled self-control, but through genuine heart-level desire for purity.

Let the inside drive the outside. That's the order God ordained. That's the transformation that lasts.

The Only Cleansing That Matters

Here's the glorious truth embedded in Jesus's command to clean the inside first: You can't clean your own heart. You can't transform your own internal reality. You can't make yourself pure.

But Jesus can.

"Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" (Ezekiel 36:25-27, NASB).

This is God's promise. Not: "Clean yourself up and then come to Me." But: "I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart. I will put My Spirit within you."

The Pharisees tried to clean themselves through external conformity. It didn't work. They ended up as whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside, full of death on the inside.

You can't Pharisee your way to righteousness. You can't perform your way to purity. You can't religiously-activity your way to heart transformation.

Only God can clean the inside. Only Jesus can transform your heart. Only the Holy Spirit can produce genuine internal change.

And He will. When you come to Him. When you confess your inability to clean yourself. When you stop trying to look good and start desperately crying out for Him to make you actually good.

The outside matters. God cares about your behavior. But He knows the only path to lasting behavioral change is heart transformation. Clean the inside, and the outside becomes clean.

Try to clean the outside while leaving the inside filthy, and you become a hypocrite. A whitewashed tomb. A cup that looks clean but is actually toxic.

So come to Jesus. Confess the filth inside. Stop pretending you're clean when you're corrupt. Stop performing when you're dying.

And let Him clean you. From the inside out. The only cleansing that matters. The only transformation that lasts.

Because He's not interested in your religious performance. He wants your heart.

And when He gets your heart, everything else follows.

"You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also."

– Matthew 23:26, NASB

Chapter 11: First Go to the Lost Sheep

Matthew 10:5-6; Matthew 15:24

The Unexpected Priority

Jesus is sending out the twelve disciples on their first mission. It's a training exercise—preparing them for the ministry they'll continue after His ascension. He gives them authority to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. Incredible power. Divine commission.

And then He gives them very specific instructions about where *not* to go:

"These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: 'Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'" (Matthew 10:5-6, NASB).

Don't go to the Gentiles. Don't go to the Samaritans. Go to Israel. Specifically, to the *lost* sheep of Israel.

This seems strange to us. Weren't the Gentiles lost? Didn't the Samaritans need the gospel? Why this narrow focus?

Later, a Canaanite woman comes to Jesus begging Him to heal her demon-possessed daughter. The disciples want to send her away. But she persists, and Jesus responds with words that sound almost harsh:

"But He answered and said, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'" (Matthew 15:24, NASB).

"I was sent *only*..." Not primarily. Not mostly. *Only*. To the lost sheep of Israel.

Jesus had a specific mission during His earthly ministry: seek and save the lost within Israel first. Not because the Gentiles didn't matter—the Great Commission would eventually send disciples to "all the nations" (Matthew 28:19). But because there was an order, a priority, a sequence to God's redemptive plan.

And the priority was always the same: Go to the lost. Seek those who are far from God. Find the wandering sheep. Pursue those who are perishing.

Jesus makes this explicit in Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (NASB).

This is His mission statement. His purpose. His priority. Seek and save the lost.

Not: Maintain and comfort the found. Not: Build elaborate programs for the already-converted. Not: Create religious systems that primarily serve those already inside the fold.

Seek and save the lost.

And He calls His followers to share that priority. To have hearts that beat in sync with the Father's heart—a heart that is always seeking, always searching, always pursuing those who are far from Him.

Understanding "The Lost Sheep"

When Jesus uses the phrase "lost sheep," He's drawing on a rich biblical image. Israel understood what it meant. Sheep don't wander because they're rebellious or defiant. They wander because they're sheep—easily distracted, prone to following whatever looks appealing in the moment, unable to find their way back once they've strayed.

And once a sheep is lost, it's in mortal danger. It can't defend itself. It can't survive alone. It will die unless the shepherd comes looking for it.

Ezekiel used this image to indict Israel's leaders:

"Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost" (Ezekiel 34:2-4, NASB).

The shepherds—the religious leaders—were supposed to care for the sheep. Strengthen the weak. Heal the diseased. Bind up the broken. *Seek the lost.*

But they didn't. They cared for themselves instead. Fed themselves. Clothed themselves. And the sheep scattered, became lost, died.

So God declares: "For thus says the Lord God, 'Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out... I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick'" (Ezekiel 34:11, 16, NASB).

I Myself will search. Since the shepherds won't do it, God will. He will seek the lost. Bring back the scattered. Care for the broken.

This is who Jesus is. God Himself, come to seek and save the lost. The Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to find the one (Luke 15:4). The Savior who came not for the healthy but the sick, not for the righteous but sinners (Mark 2:17).

When Jesus says "go to the lost sheep," He's not being exclusionary. He's being missional. He's identifying who needs the gospel most urgently—those who are lost, scattered, broken, dying.

In His earthly ministry, that meant focusing on Israel first. In our ministry, it means prioritizing those who are far from God—whoever and wherever they are.

The Heart That Seeks the Lost

Before we look at what people put first instead of seeking the lost, we need to understand why this is Jesus's priority. Why does He care so much about the lost? Why does He make seeking them the central mission?

Because this is the Father's heart.

"What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'" (Luke 15:4-6, NASB).

Notice: The shepherd doesn't send someone to look. He goes himself. He doesn't search half-heartedly and give up if it takes too long. He searches "until he finds it." And when he finds it, there's rejoicing—not condemnation, not lecture, not punishment. Just joy. The lost has been found.

Then Jesus explains: "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7, NASB).

More joy over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who don't need repentance. Heaven throws a party when the lost are found. Angels rejoice when wandering sheep come home.

This is God's heart. He delights in finding the lost more than maintaining the found. Not because the found don't matter—but because they're already safe. The lost are in danger. And God's heart breaks for those who are perishing.

Jesus demonstrates this throughout His ministry. He eats with tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:10-11). He touches lepers (Matthew 8:3). He talks to the Samaritan woman with the messy past (John 4). He welcomes prostitutes and outcasts (Luke 7:37-50).

The religious leaders are scandalized: "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2, NASB).

Yes. Exactly. That's the point. That's His mission. He came to seek and save the lost, and you can't do that while maintaining safe distance from them.

This is the heart Jesus calls His followers to have. Not a heart that judges the lost, avoids the messy, condemns the broken. A heart that seeks them. Pursues them. Does whatever it takes to bring them home.

Because that's the Father's heart. And we're called to share His priorities.

What We Put First Instead

The human tendency—even among believers, even among ministry leaders—is to prioritize comfort and safety over seeking the lost. We'd rather minister to people who are already found, already safe, already part of the fold. Going after the lost is risky, messy, uncomfortable, costly.

Jonah: Comfortable Ministry Over Difficult Assignment

God gives Jonah a clear assignment: "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me" (Jonah 1:2, NASB).

Nineveh. Capital of Assyria. Israel's brutal enemy. The people who had conquered, oppressed, and brutalized God's people. Violent. Wicked. Deserving of judgment.

And God says: Go preach to them. Give them opportunity to repent.

Jonah's response? "But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1:3, NASB).

He runs. In the opposite direction. As far away as he can get.

Why? He explains later, after God forces him to go and Nineveh repents:

"Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (Jonah 4:2, NASB).

Jonah didn't want to go because he knew God might show mercy. He knew if Nineveh repented, God would forgive them. And Jonah didn't want them forgiven. He wanted them judged. Destroyed. He'd rather see them die than see them saved.

So he chose comfortable disobedience over difficult obedience. He chose staying in his own country over going to the lost. He chose his preferences over God's priorities.

And even after God miraculously delivers him from the fish, even after he finally goes and preaches, even after the entire city repents—Jonah is angry. Furious that God showed mercy.

"But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry" (Jonah 4:1, NASB).

The greatest revival in Scripture—an entire city from the king down repenting and turning to God—and the preacher is mad about it.

Why? Because Jonah didn't share God's heart for the lost. He wanted comfortable ministry among people he liked, not difficult assignment to people he despised. He wanted judgment for his enemies, not salvation. He wanted God to share his prejudices, not call him to overcome them.

How many ministers, how many churches, how many Christians are like Jonah? We're happy to minister to people like us. People who are easy to love. People who share our culture, our values, our socioeconomic status.

But the lost who make us uncomfortable? The messy people whose lives are complicated? The ones who've hurt us or people we care about? The ones whose sin disgusts us? The ones who might not fit easily into our church culture?

We'd rather they face judgment than repent. We'd rather avoid them than pursue them. We'd rather stay comfortable than obey God's call to seek the lost.

We put comfortable ministry first. Difficult assignment second. And we miss the joy of seeing God save people we thought were beyond reach.

The Hired Hand: Self-Protection Over Seeking the Lost

Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with the hired hand:

"He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep" (John 10:12-13, NASB).

The hired hand doesn't own the sheep. When danger comes, he abandons them. He's not willing to risk himself to protect them. He's in it for the paycheck, not for love of the sheep.

Contrast that with the good shepherd: "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11, NASB).

The good shepherd doesn't flee when danger comes. He doesn't abandon the sheep to save himself. He *lays down his life* for them.

And the good shepherd doesn't just protect the sheep in the fold. He seeks the scattered: "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd" (John 10:16, NASB).

Other sheep. Not yet in the fold. Lost. Scattered. And the good shepherd *must* bring them. It's not optional. It's central to His mission.

But the hired hand mentality says: "My job is to care for the sheep already in the fold. The lost sheep? Not my problem. Too risky. Too costly. Someone else can go after them."

This is self-protection over seeking the lost. Comfort over mission. Safety over sacrifice.

And it shows up everywhere in modern Christianity:

Churches that focus exclusively on programs for members while never reaching out to the community.

Pastors who pour all their energy into keeping the already-converted happy while ignoring those dying without Christ outside the walls.

Christians who insulate themselves from the lost because engaging with messy, broken people is uncomfortable and might cost them something.

We want to be shepherds who stay safely in the fold with the compliant sheep. We don't want to be good shepherds who risk everything to find the lost, bring back the scattered, seek those who are far from God.

We put self-protection first. Seeking the lost second.

And the lost remain lost while we congratulate ourselves on how well we're caring for the ninety-nine.

The Ninety-Nine: The Safe Over the Searching

In Jesus's parable of the lost sheep, there's an implied question: What about the ninety-nine? Doesn't leaving them to search for the one put them at risk?

"What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4, NASB).

Leave the ninety-nine. Go after the one. This seems irresponsible. Dangerous. What if something happens to the ninety-nine while you're searching for the one?

But Jesus presents this as obvious. *Of course* you leave the ninety-nine to find the one. That's what shepherds do. That's what love does. That's what the Father does.

The ninety-nine are safe. In the pasture. Together. They don't need searching—they're already found. The one is lost. Alone. In danger. Dying.

So the shepherd goes after the one. Not because the ninety-nine don't matter. But because they're not the ones in mortal danger.

Yet in many churches, ministry is organized entirely around the ninety-nine. Programs for members. Services for the already-converted. Resources for people already in the fold.

And when someone suggests actually going after the lost—changing worship styles to be more accessible, restructuring programs to reach out rather than just serve in, allocating resources to evangelism and outreach—the ninety-nine object.

"What about us? We're the ones who've been faithful. We're the ones who show up every week. We're the ones who give. Don't we deserve the shepherd's attention?"

This is prioritizing the safe over the searching. The found over the lost. Maintenance over mission.

And it completely misses Jesus's heart.

Yes, care for the ninety-nine. Feed them. Strengthen them. Equip them. But don't make them the exclusive focus while the lost sheep perish.

William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, understood this:

"Not called! did you say? 'Not heard the call,' I think you should say. Put your ear down to the Bible, and hear Him bid you go and pull sinners out of the fire of sin. Put your ear down to the burdened, agonized heart of humanity, and listen to its pitiful wail for help."

The call to seek the lost isn't for special people with special gifts. It's for every follower of Jesus. Because it's central to Jesus's mission.

If you can't hear the call, you're not listening to Scripture. You're not listening to the cries of lost humanity. You're not listening to the heart of God.

Why Jesus Prioritizes the Lost

Jesus makes seeking the lost the priority not because the found don't matter, but because of what's at stake and whose heart is revealed in the pursuit.

God's Heart Beats for the Lost

We've already seen this in the parable of the lost sheep. But it's worth emphasizing: Heaven rejoices more over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:7).

This doesn't mean God loves the lost more than the found. It means the lost need Him more. They're in greater danger. And when they're found, the relief, the joy, the celebration is overwhelming.

It's like a parent with three children safely at home and one missing. The parent loves all four equally. But the focus is on finding the missing child because that child is in danger. And when the missing child is found, there's a celebration—not because they're more loved, but because they were lost and now they're found, were dead and now they're alive (Luke 15:32).

This is God's heart. He delights in finding the lost. He celebrates when wanderers come home. He throws parties in heaven when sinners repent.

And He calls His people to share that heart. To care about what He cares about. To prioritize what He prioritizes. To seek what He seeks.

If your heart doesn't break for the lost, you're not aligned with God's heart. If you don't care about people far from God, you're not sharing the Father's priorities. If you're content to stay with the ninety-nine while the one perishes, you're not following the Good Shepherd.

John Piper writes: "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't."

The reason we seek the lost isn't just to grow the church or fill the pews. It's so more image-bearers of God can join the worship that will last forever. It's so heaven's party can include more redeemed sinners singing God's praises.

We seek the lost because God seeks the lost. And seeking the lost is an expression of worship—prioritizing what God prioritizes, caring about what He cares about, joining Him in His redemptive mission.

Priority Reflects the Father's Priorities

When you look at what someone prioritizes, you learn what they value. When you see where they spend their time, their energy, their resources—you understand their heart.

The same is true in ministry and in the Christian life.

If a church spends 95% of its budget on programs for members and 5% on reaching the lost, you know their priority. They value comfort for the found more than rescue for the lost.

If a Christian spends all their time with other Christians and never builds relationships with non-believers, you know their priority. They value spiritual safety more than mission.

If a pastor spends all their energy keeping church members happy and no energy reaching the community, you know their priority. They value institutional maintenance more than kingdom expansion.

Jesus modeled different priorities. He spent time with His disciples—teaching them, equipping them, preparing them. But He also spent shocking amounts of time with the lost. Tax collectors and sinners. Prostitutes and outcasts. The religiously unclean and socially unacceptable.

The Pharisees criticized Him for it: "Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Matthew 11:19, NASB).

And Jesus didn't deny it. He owned it. "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32, NASB).

His priorities reflected the Father's priorities. Seek and save the lost. Heal the sick. Bind up the broken. Bring back the scattered.

And He calls us to the same priorities.

Not to the exclusion of caring for believers. Not abandoning the ninety-nine. But making sure we're actually going after the one. Actually seeking the lost. Actually prioritizing what the Father prioritizes.

The Lost Are Never Beyond Reach

One of the reasons we avoid seeking the lost is because we've written certain people off as unreachable. Too far gone. Too hardened. Too sinful. Too hostile. Too different from us.

But Jesus never did that. Nobody was beyond reach. Nobody was too lost to be found.

The Samaritan woman with five failed marriages and a current relationship that wasn't a marriage? Jesus spoke to her, and she became an evangelist to her whole town (John 4).

Matthew the tax collector—a traitor to his people, collaborating with Rome for profit? Jesus called him, and he became a disciple and gospel writer (Matthew 9:9).

The woman caught in adultery, about to be stoned? Jesus forgave her and told her to sin no more (John 8:1-11).

The thief dying on the cross beside Him? Jesus promised him paradise (Luke 23:43).

Paul, who was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples" (Acts 9:1)? Jesus appeared to him, and he became the greatest missionary in church history.

Nobody is too lost. Nobody is beyond reach. Nobody is too far from God.

The problem isn't that people are unreachable. The problem is that we've decided they're not worth reaching. We've prioritized our comfort over their salvation. We've chosen to stay with the safe ninety-nine rather than risk pursuing the dangerous one.

But Jesus says: Go to the lost sheep. All of them. Wherever they are. However far they've wandered. However unlikely their repentance seems.

Go. Seek. Pursue. Because the Father seeks them. Because heaven rejoices when they're found. Because they're never beyond reach when the Good Shepherd is seeking them.

The Way Forward: Seeking the Lost Today

So how do we actually prioritize seeking the lost? How do we align our hearts with the Father's heart and make His mission our mission?

Examine Your Priorities

Start with honest assessment. Where do you actually spend your time, energy, and resources?

If you're a church leader: What percentage of your budget goes to programs for members versus reaching the lost? What percentage of your time is spent keeping the ninety-nine happy versus seeking the one?

If you're a Christian: How many of your close friendships are with believers versus non-believers? When was the last time you had a spiritual conversation with someone far from God? How much of your life is insulated from the lost?

Not to induce guilt. But to see reality. You can't change what you won't acknowledge.

Develop a Heart for the Lost

You can't manufacture compassion through willpower. But you can put yourself in positions where God can give you His heart.

Pray for specific lost people. By name. Regularly. Ask God to save them. And ask God to break your heart for them the way His heart is broken.

Spend time in Scripture seeing how Jesus interacted with the lost. Watch His compassion. His patience. His willingness to pursue them at great cost. Let that shape your own heart.

Ask God to help you see lost people the way He sees them—as sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36), as fields ready for harvest (John 4:35), as people made in His image who are perishing without Him.

Build Relationships With Non-Believers

You can't seek the lost from a distance. You have to actually know them. Spend time with them. Build genuine friendships.

This doesn't mean compromising your faith or participating in sin. It means being present in their lives. Caring about them as people, not just as evangelism projects. Listening to their stories. Understanding their struggles. Earning the right to speak into their lives.

Jesus was called a "friend of sinners" (Matthew 11:19). Not because He sinned with them, but because He actually built relationships with them. He ate meals with them. Spent time in their homes. Engaged them with genuine love and interest.

We should be known the same way. Not as people who judge the lost from a distance, but as people who love them up close.

Make Evangelism a Regular Practice

Don't wait for the perfect opportunity. Don't wait until you feel equipped. Start sharing the gospel in whatever ways you can, right now.

Some people are gifted evangelists who can share the gospel with strangers. If that's you, do it.

Most people are more effective sharing with people they know—friends, neighbors, coworkers, family. Build relationships. Pray for opportunities. Be ready to give an answer for the hope within you (1 Peter 3:15).

The specific method matters less than the commitment to actually do it. Seek the lost. Tell them about Jesus. Invite them to experience the love of God that's transformed your life.

Support Ministries That Reach the Lost

If you're not personally called to cross-cultural missions, support those who are. If you're not gifted in evangelism, support evangelistic ministries. If you can't go yourself, send others.

Give financially to organizations reaching the lost. Pray for missionaries and evangelists. Use your gifts to support their work.

The body of Christ has different roles, but we're all part of the same mission. Some go. Some send. Some pray. Some support. But all of us should be committed to seeking the lost because that's the Father's heart.

Restructure Church Around Mission

If you're in church leadership, this is crucial: Don't let your church become a members-only club focused exclusively on serving people already in the fold.

Ask hard questions:

- Are we structured to reach the lost or just maintain the found?
- Do our programs exist primarily to serve members or to reach the community?
- Would an outsider feel welcome in our gatherings?
- Are we asking the ninety-nine to sacrifice their preferences so we can reach the one?

Churches should care for believers—teaching them, equipping them, shepherding them. But that's not the only purpose. The church exists for mission. And mission means seeking the lost.

Remember Who You Were

Finally, never forget: You were once lost. You were the wandering sheep. You were far from God, dead in your transgressions, without hope.

And someone sought you. Someone shared the gospel with you. Someone prayed for you. Someone loved you enough to pursue you when you were far from God.

Now you're found. Safe in the fold. Secure in the Good Shepherd's care.

Will you join Him in seeking others who are still lost? Will you prioritize what He prioritizes? Will you go after the scattered, seek the wandering, pursue those who are far from God?

Or will you stay comfortable with the ninety-nine while the lost perish?

The Mission That Matters

Jesus's earthly ministry had a laser focus: seek and save the lost sheep of Israel. Not because others didn't matter, but because there was an order, a strategy, a plan.

Israel first. Then all nations.

The found equipped. Then sent to find the lost.

The gospel preached in Jerusalem. Then Judea and Samaria. Then to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Our mission today is broader than Jesus's earthly mission—we're sent to all nations, all peoples, every tribe and tongue. But the priority is the same: seek the lost.

Not maintain the institution. Not keep the already-converted comfortable. Not build religious empires that exist primarily to serve themselves.

Seek the lost.

Because that's what Jesus came to do. That's what breaks the Father's heart. That's what causes heaven to rejoice.

And if we claim to follow Jesus, if we claim to love what the Father loves, if we claim to be part of His mission—we must prioritize seeking the lost.

Not second. Not when it's convenient. Not after we've taken care of everyone already in the fold.

First. Because they're in danger. Because time is running out. Because the Good Shepherd is seeking them, and He's calling us to join Him.

So go. To the lost sheep. Whoever they are. Wherever they are. However far they've wandered.

Go first to them. Because the Father's heart beats for them. Because heaven rejoices when they're found. Because they're never beyond reach when the Good Shepherd is seeking.

And when you find them—when that lost sheep comes home, when that wandering sinner repents, when that person far from God experiences His love—you'll understand why Jesus made this the priority.

Because there's no greater joy than seeing the lost found. No greater celebration than watching someone pass from death to life. No greater privilege than partnering with God in His redemptive mission.

The lost are waiting. The Father is seeking. The question is: Will you join Him?

"For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

– Luke 19:10, NASB

PART SIX: THE FOUNDATION FIRST

Chapter 12: First the Natural, Then the Spiritual

1 Corinthians 15:46

The Order That Cannot Be Reversed

Paul is writing to the Corinthians about resurrection. Some in the church are denying the resurrection of the dead—perhaps thinking they've already entered into some fully spiritual existence, or perhaps unable to conceive of bodily resurrection.

Paul systematically dismantles their error. He explains that Christ has been raised. That His resurrection is the firstfruits of all who will be raised. That there's a sequence, an order, a progression to God's redemptive plan.

And then he makes a statement that applies far beyond the specific question of resurrection bodies:

"However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual" (1 Corinthians 15:46, NASB).

This is a foundational principle. A divine order that cannot be reversed. A sequence established by God Himself.

First the natural. *Then* the spiritual.

In context, Paul is saying: First there was Adam, the natural man. Then there is Christ, the spiritual man. First the perishable body. Then the imperishable. First the earthly. Then the heavenly.

But the principle extends to all of spiritual reality. God has an order. A sequence. A progression from natural to spiritual that cannot and must not be reversed.

You cannot have spiritual birth without first having natural birth. You cannot build a spiritual life without first laying the foundation. You cannot understand spiritual things without first being made spiritually alive.

The natural comes first. Always. Because that's the order God established. And trying to reverse it—trying to achieve spiritual reality without the proper foundation—is futile, frustrating, and fundamentally impossible.

You Must Be Born Again

Nowhere is this principle more clearly illustrated than in Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus. It's a nighttime meeting between Jesus and a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a teacher of Israel. Nicodemus comes seeking understanding:

"Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:2, NASB).

Nicodemus approaches Jesus intellectually. As one teacher to another. Looking for knowledge, insight, understanding. He's impressed by the signs. He recognizes divine authority. He wants to learn.

And Jesus's response bypasses his entire approach:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, NASB).

Born again. Not "unless you understand correctly." Not "unless you study sufficiently." Not "unless you achieve intellectual comprehension."

Born again. A completely new start. A regeneration. A spiritual birth that's just as radical and transformative as physical birth.

Nicodemus is confused: "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" (John 3:4, NASB).

He's thinking naturally. Literally. Physically. How can someone be born twice? It's impossible.

And Jesus explains: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again'" (John 3:5-7, NASB).

Two births. Natural and spiritual. Flesh and Spirit.

Everyone has experienced the first birth—natural, physical, fleshly. That which is born of flesh is flesh. You were born into physical existence through natural birth.

But to enter God's kingdom, to see spiritual reality, to have eternal life—you need a second birth. A spiritual birth. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

And the order cannot be reversed. You cannot be born again unless you've first been born. The spiritual birth presupposes and builds upon the natural birth. *First* the natural, *then* the spiritual.

This is the foundation of everything else. Before you can grow spiritually, you must be born spiritually. Before you can understand spiritual truth, you must be made spiritually alive. Before you can live for God, you must be born of God.

Oswald Chambers writes: "You must be born again. Until this crisis comes, all your prayers and fastings and good works and religiousness are of no avail whatever, if you want to be a Christian."

Until this crisis comes. Until you are born again, born of the Spirit, made spiritually alive—everything else is preliminary. Religious activity without regeneration. Knowledge without life. Form without power.

The natural birth came first. Now the spiritual birth must come. And without it, everything else is futile.

The Foundation of Spiritual Birth

Paul explains why this order matters so critically:

"But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Corinthians 2:14, NASB).

The natural man—the person who has only experienced natural birth, who has not been born of the Spirit—*cannot* accept the things of God. Not "will not" (though that's also true). *Cannot*. It's an impossibility. Like asking a blind person to appreciate a sunset or a deaf person to enjoy a symphony.

Why? Because spiritual things "are spiritually appraised." They require spiritual capacity to understand. And that capacity only comes through spiritual birth.

Think about natural birth for a moment. Before you were born, you had potential for life but not actual participation in it. You existed, but you couldn't see, hear, taste, touch, or experience the world. Birth brought you into an entirely new realm of existence with capacities you didn't have before.

Spiritual birth is the same. Until you're born of the Spirit, you're spiritually dead—existing but unable to perceive spiritual reality. You can hear about God, but you can't truly know Him. You can read the Bible, but you can't understand its spiritual truth. You can engage in religious activity, but you can't have genuine relationship with God.

Birth changes everything. It brings you from death to life. From darkness to light. From spiritual inability to spiritual capacity.

This is why Jesus emphasizes it so strongly to Nicodemus: "You *must* be born again" (John 3:7, NASB, emphasis added). Not "it would be helpful." Not "it's one option among many." *Must*. It's the non-negotiable foundation. The essential first step. The prerequisite for everything else.

And it's entirely God's work. You didn't cause your natural birth—you were born. You don't cause your spiritual birth either—you *are* born again by the Spirit of God (John 1:13).

Natural birth first. Then spiritual birth. And spiritual birth is the foundation upon which everything else is built.

What We Put First Instead

The human tendency is to try to reverse this order. To pursue spiritual understanding before spiritual birth. To attempt spiritual performance before spiritual transformation. To seek spiritual experiences while remaining spiritually dead.

Nicodemus: Intellectual Understanding Before Spiritual Birth

Nicodemus represents the person who tries to approach God through the mind alone. He's intelligent. Educated. A teacher of Israel. He knows Scripture. He recognizes Jesus's authority.

But he's never been born again. He's trying to understand spiritual things with natural capacity. And Jesus tells him it's impossible.

"If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (John 3:12, NASB).

You can't comprehend heavenly things through earthly understanding. You can't grasp spiritual reality through natural reasoning. You need spiritual birth to see spiritual truth.

But Nicodemus wants to understand first, then believe. He wants intellectual clarity before spiritual commitment. He's putting knowledge before regeneration. Understanding before transformation.

And Jesus says: That's backwards. You must be born again first. Then you'll see. Then you'll understand. Then spiritual reality will make sense.

This is the error of every person who says, "I need to figure this all out before I can believe. I need answers to all my questions. I need to resolve all my doubts. *Then* I'll commit."

But it doesn't work that way. The spiritual is not first. The natural—including natural reasoning—cannot produce spiritual understanding. You must be born again. Then, as a spiritually alive person, you'll begin to understand spiritual truth.

Not blind faith that ignores reason. But recognizing that some realities can only be perceived from the inside. A caterpillar can't understand what it means to fly until it becomes a butterfly. A person who's only experienced natural birth can't understand spiritual reality until they experience spiritual birth.

Many highly intelligent, well-educated people never come to faith because they insist on reversing the order. They want to understand before they believe. Comprehend before they're born again. Figure it all out with their natural mind before surrendering to supernatural transformation.

And they remain in darkness. Not because they're not smart enough, but because they're trying to see spiritual things with natural eyes. And it can't be done.

First the natural—including the limits of natural understanding. *Then* the spiritual—including spiritual capacity to understand spiritual truth.

The Galatians: Beginning With Spirit, Perfecting by Flesh

The Galatians made the opposite error. They began in the Spirit but tried to be perfected by the flesh. They reversed the order midstream.

Paul writes to them with frustration and astonishment:

"Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3, NASB).

They had experienced spiritual birth. They had received the Spirit. They had started correctly—with God's supernatural work of regeneration.

But then they were persuaded to add human works. Religious performance. Fleshly effort. They thought they could complete through human achievement what God had begun through divine grace.

This is trying to reverse the order. Trying to use the natural to accomplish what only the spiritual can do. Trying to perfect by the flesh what was begun by the Spirit.

And Paul says it's foolish. Not just wrong—foolish. Absurd. Like being born and then trying to return to the womb. Like being given life and then trying to manufacture it yourself.

The spiritual came through the Spirit. It can only continue through the Spirit. You can't switch to the flesh midway and expect to arrive at spiritual maturity.

This error is rampant in Christianity. People genuinely born again, genuinely saved by grace through faith, who then try to grow through human effort, religious performance, self-improvement programs.

They were born of the Spirit. But now they're trying to mature through the flesh. Reading the right books. Following the right programs. Adopting the right disciplines. All good things—but useless if you're depending on them instead of on the Spirit who gave you life.

The order is: born of the Spirit, then walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 25). Regenerated by God, then transformed by God. Started in grace, continued in grace. Begun supernaturally, matured supernaturally.

Natural effort cannot produce spiritual results. The flesh cannot perfect what the Spirit began. The order cannot be reversed.

Those Seeking Signs: Spectacle Over Substance

Throughout Jesus's ministry, people demanded signs. They wanted spectacular proof. Miraculous demonstrations. External validation before internal transformation.

"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah'" (Matthew 12:38-39, NASB).

They wanted the supernatural spectacle first. Then they'd believe. Then they'd commit. Then they'd follow.

But Jesus says: That's backwards. And it's evil. It's putting the sensational before the substantial. The spectacular before the spiritual. The external proof before the internal reality.

This is still the error of many today. "Show me a miracle, then I'll believe." "Give me an experience, then I'll commit." "Let me see something supernatural, then I'll trust."

But God's order is: Believe first. Be born again first. Receive spiritual life first. *Then* you'll see. *Then* you'll understand. *Then* you'll experience spiritual reality.

Jesus tells Thomas: "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (John 20:29, NASB).

More blessed are those who believe without seeing. Who trust before they have empirical proof. Who are born again by faith, and then—from that foundation of spiritual life—experience spiritual reality.

The sign-seekers wanted proof before faith. They wanted the spiritual manifestation before spiritual birth. They wanted to skip the foundation and jump straight to the building.

And Jesus says it won't work. The foundation must come first. Spiritual birth precedes spiritual sight. Regeneration precedes revelation.

First the natural—including the step of faith that feels natural to fallen humanity. *Then* the spiritual—including spiritual experiences, spiritual understanding, spiritual power.

Why Jesus Prioritizes This Order

Jesus and Paul aren't being arbitrary when they insist on this sequence. God's order isn't a random preference. It's rooted in the nature of spiritual reality and the necessity of proper foundations.

God's Order Cannot Be Reversed

Throughout creation, God establishes order. Sequences that cannot be violated without chaos.

You cannot harvest before you plant. You cannot build the roof before the foundation. You cannot be an adult before you're a child. You cannot run before you walk.

These aren't arbitrary rules. They're the nature of how reality works. The order is built into the structure of creation.

The same is true spiritually. God has established an order: natural birth, then spiritual birth. Foundation, then building. Death to self, then life in Christ. Repentance and faith, then sanctification. Justification, then glorification.

And the order cannot be reversed. Not because God is rigid or inflexible, but because that's how spiritual reality works. You can't be sanctified before you're justified. You can't mature spiritually before you're born spiritually. You can't understand spiritual truth before you're made spiritually alive.

Trying to reverse the order isn't just disobedient. It's impossible. Like trying to be born before you exist. The sequence is part of the design.

Foundation Precedes Building

Paul uses architectural imagery throughout his letters. The foundation must be laid before the building can be erected:

"For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11, NASB).

Jesus is the foundation. Spiritual birth—being united to Christ, regenerated by His Spirit, justified by His work—is the foundation upon which everything else is built.

You can't build a spiritual life on the foundation of religious performance. You can't construct Christian maturity on the basis of intellectual understanding alone. You can't erect a relationship with God on the foundation of spiritual experiences.

The foundation is Christ. Received by faith. Resulting in new birth. Creating spiritual capacity where there was none before.

And once that foundation is laid, then the building can begin. Then spiritual growth is possible. Then maturity can develop. Then understanding can deepen.

But without the foundation, everything else collapses. It doesn't matter how impressive the building looks if it has no foundation. It won't stand.

This is why Jesus told Nicodemus, "You *must* be born again." Not "it would be nice" or "it's one option." *Must*. Because without spiritual birth, there's no foundation. And without a foundation, everything else is futile.

Natural Birth Precedes Spiritual Birth

This seems obvious, but it's worth stating: You cannot be born again unless you've first been born.

Spiritual birth presupposes natural birth. The regeneration of your spirit presupposes you have a spirit to regenerate. The transformation of your heart presupposes you have a heart to transform.

God doesn't create you spiritually and then physically. He creates you physically (through natural birth), then recreates you spiritually (through new birth).

This is the order Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15: "The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly" (1 Corinthians 15:47-49, NASB).

First, we bear the image of the earthy. We're born naturally, in Adam, subject to sin and death. This is our natural state. Our starting point. The reality from which we need rescue.

Then—through new birth, through union with Christ—we begin to bear the image of the heavenly. We're born again, in Christ, given new life and spiritual capacity.

The earthly first. Then the heavenly. The natural first. Then the spiritual.

And just as you had no control over your natural birth—you were born—you have no control over your spiritual birth. It's God's work. His Spirit. His initiative. His power.

You don't make yourself born again any more than you made yourself born the first time. You receive it. You're acted upon. You're the object of God's regenerating grace.

But you must be born again. And that new birth is the foundation for everything else.

The Way Forward: Starting at the Foundation

So how do we apply this principle? How do we make sure we're following God's established order and not trying to reverse it?

Have You Been Born Again?

This is the first question. The foundational question. The one everything else depends on.

Not "are you religious?" Not "do you believe in God?" Not "do you attend church?" Not "are you trying to be a good person?"

Have you been born again? Has there been a moment—or a season—when the Spirit of God made you spiritually alive? When you passed from death to life? When you were transformed from natural person to spiritual person?

Jesus said you must be born again. Paul said if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17). The New Testament consistently teaches that conversion involves radical transformation, not just incremental improvement.

If you've never experienced this—if you've been religious but never regenerated, active in church but never born of the Spirit, knowledgeable about God but never made alive by God—then everything else is premature.

You can't grow spiritually until you're born spiritually. You can't understand Scripture deeply until the Spirit illuminates it. You can't have genuine relationship with God until He's made you His child through new birth.

So start here. Cry out to God. Acknowledge your spiritual deadness. Confess your sin. Trust in Christ's finished work. Ask the Spirit to regenerate you, to make you born again, to give you spiritual life.

And He will. Because "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13, NASB).

Don't Try to Understand Everything Before You Believe

If you're waiting for complete intellectual clarity before you trust Christ, you're reversing the order. You're trying to achieve with your natural mind what can only come through spiritual birth.

Yes, faith is reasonable. Yes, there are good answers to honest questions. Yes, Christianity can withstand intellectual scrutiny.

But you don't need to resolve every question before you believe. You don't need to understand everything before you're born again.

In fact, you *can't* understand everything until you're born again. Spiritual things are spiritually appraised. You need spiritual capacity to fully grasp spiritual truth.

So take the step of faith. Trust Christ based on what you do understand. Be born again. Then, from that foundation of spiritual life, continue pursuing understanding.

You'll find that things that seemed incomprehensible become clear. Questions that seemed unanswerable find resolution. Truth that seemed foolish becomes precious.

Not because you got smarter. But because you got spiritually alive.

Don't Try to Perfect by the Flesh What God Began by the Spirit

If you are born again, don't fall into the Galatian error. Don't try to complete through human effort what God began through divine grace.

You were saved by grace through faith, not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9). You're also sanctified by grace through faith. You grow spiritually the same way you were born spiritually—by the Spirit's power, not your own.

This doesn't mean you're passive. It means you're dependent. You pursue spiritual disciplines not to earn God's favor but to position yourself to receive His grace. You obey not to manufacture transformation but to cooperate with the Spirit who is transforming you.

Walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16). Depend on the Spirit. Trust the Spirit to complete the work He began in you (Philippians 1:6).

The spiritual is not perfected by the natural. The work begun by the Spirit must continue by the Spirit.

Build on the Foundation That's Been Laid

Once you're born again—once the foundation is in place—then build.

Grow in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). Be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2). Pursue holiness (Hebrews 12:14). Develop spiritual disciplines. Study Scripture. Pray. Worship. Serve. Love.

All of this is appropriate and necessary for those who have been born again. But none of it substitutes for being born again.

You can't grow spiritually until you're born spiritually. But once you are, you must grow. The foundation has been laid. Now build on it. Carefully. Faithfully. Dependently on the Spirit.

Help Others Understand the Proper Order

Many people in your life are trying to build without a foundation. They're religious but not regenerated. Active but not alive. Moral but not transformed.

Help them see the order. Not with condescension, but with compassion. You were once in the same position—trying to please God, understand God, serve God without being born of God.

Tell them what Jesus told Nicodemus: "You must be born again." Not "you should try harder" or "you need to understand more" or "you have to be more religious."

You must be born again. That's the foundation. That's the starting point. That's the non-negotiable first step.

And once they understand that—once they're born of the Spirit—then everything else becomes possible.

Never Outgrow Your Dependence on God's Grace

Finally, remember that the Christian life begins with radical dependence and continues with radical dependence. You didn't save yourself. You don't sanctify yourself. You can't glorify yourself.

From beginning to end, it's God's work. His Spirit. His grace. His power.

You were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:13). You remain dependent on Him every moment of every day.

This isn't discouraging. It's liberating. You don't have to manufacture spiritual life. You don't have to produce transformation through willpower. You don't have to perfect yourself through effort.

God began the work. God continues the work. God will complete the work.

Your job is to trust Him. Depend on Him. Walk by His Spirit. Build on the foundation He's laid.

The Order That Leads to Life

Paul's simple statement—"the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual"—contains a universe of truth about how God works and how we must respond.

God has established an order. Natural birth, then spiritual birth. Foundation, then building. Death to self, then life in Christ. Begun by the Spirit, continued by the Spirit, perfected by the Spirit.

We cannot reverse this order. We cannot achieve spiritual results through natural means. We cannot understand spiritual truth through natural reasoning alone. We cannot grow spiritually without first being born spiritually.

But when we follow God's order—when we're born again, when we build on the foundation of Christ, when we walk by the Spirit—we discover that the spiritual life is not only possible but abundant.

Not because we've achieved it. But because God has given it. Through new birth. Through regeneration. Through the supernatural work of the Spirit making dead people alive.

Nicodemus came to Jesus looking for understanding. Jesus told him he needed new birth.

The Galatians tried to perfect by the flesh what God began by the Spirit. Paul called them back to dependence on grace.

The sign-seekers demanded proof before faith. Jesus said the only sign they'd get was resurrection—and even that wouldn't convince those determined not to believe.

In every case, people were trying to reverse God's order. Trying to achieve spiritually what can only be given spiritually. Trying to understand before being transformed. Trying to perfect through human effort what only divine grace can accomplish.

And Jesus and Paul keep pointing them back to the foundation: You must be born again. You must be made spiritually alive. You must have the Spirit dwelling in you. You must start with what only God can do, and then—from that foundation—continue in what only God can sustain.

The natural comes first. Because that's reality. You exist. You were born. You live in a physical body in a physical world.

Then the spiritual. Not replacing the natural but transforming it. Not negating physical reality but infusing it with spiritual life. Not escaping the world but being born again within it, as salt and light, as people who've been made spiritually alive while remaining physically present.

This is the order God established. And it's the only order that leads to life.

So if you've never been born again—if you've been religious without being regenerated, if you've been trying to understand before being transformed—cry out to God. Confess your spiritual deadness. Trust in Christ. Ask the Spirit to make you born again.

And if you have been born again—if you've experienced that supernatural transformation from death to life—then build on that foundation. Walk by the Spirit. Grow in grace. Depend on God's power to complete what He began.

Because the spiritual is not first. But when the spiritual comes—when you're born again, made alive, transformed by the Spirit—everything else follows.

And you discover that what you couldn't achieve through all your natural striving, God accomplishes through one supernatural act of regeneration.

You must be born again. Not through your own effort. Not through your own understanding. Not through your own achievement.

But through the Spirit of God, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence that which does not exist.

First the natural. Then the spiritual. And when the spiritual comes through new birth, you finally see what natural eyes could never perceive: the kingdom of God, spread before you, inviting you in.

"However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual."

– 1 Corinthians 15:46, NASB

Chapter 13: First Build on the Rock

Matthew 7:24-27

The End of the Greatest Sermon

Jesus has been teaching on a mountainside. Thousands of people sit listening to what we now call the Sermon on the Mount—the most comprehensive, challenging, transformative teaching on kingdom life ever delivered.

He's covered everything. The Beatitudes. Salt and light. Murder and adultery. Divorce and oaths. Retaliation and enemies. Giving and praying and fasting. Money and worry. Judging and discernment. Asking and receiving. The narrow gate. False prophets.

It's been relentless. Radical. Demanding. World-turning-upside-down teaching that leaves no room for comfortable religion or superficial faith.

And now He's concluding. And rather than ending with an encouraging word or an easy application or a soft invitation, He tells a parable that divides His entire audience into two categories: wise and foolish. Those who will stand and those who will fall. Those building on rock and those building on sand.

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.

"Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall" (Matthew 7:24-27, NASB).

Two builders. Two foundations. Two outcomes.

Both hear Jesus's words. Both build houses. Both face the same storm. But only one survives. The difference? The foundation.

One built on rock. One built on sand. And when the inevitable storm came, the foundation determined everything.

The Two Builders

Notice what Jesus does *not* say. He doesn't say one person builds a house and the other doesn't build. Both build. Both are active. Both are constructing something.

He doesn't say one faces a storm and the other doesn't. Both face the exact same storm—rain, floods, wind. Both are tested. Both endure hardship.

He doesn't say one house looks better than the other before the storm. Presumably both houses looked fine. Both appeared solid. Both seemed well-constructed.

The only difference—and it's the difference that determines survival or destruction—is the foundation.

The Wise Builder

"Everyone who hears these words of Mine and *acts on them*" (emphasis added).

The wise builder doesn't just hear. Doesn't just appreciate the teaching. Doesn't just mentally agree with Jesus's words. He *acts on them*. He does them. He obeys them. He builds his entire life on them.

And because he builds on the solid rock of Jesus's teaching, on Christ Himself as foundation, his house stands. The storm comes. Rain pounds. Floods rise. Winds slam. And the house stands firm.

Not because there's no storm. Not because life is easy. Not because following Jesus protects you from hardship.

The house stands *because it's founded on the rock*. The foundation holds. And when the foundation holds, everything built on it is secure.

The Foolish Builder

"Everyone who hears these words of Mine and *does not act on them*" (emphasis added).

The foolish builder hears too. He's present for the sermon. He receives the same teaching. He has access to the same truth. But he doesn't act on it. He hears but doesn't do. He knows but doesn't obey. He's exposed to Christ's words but doesn't build his life on them.

Instead, he builds on sand. Maybe it's more convenient. Maybe it's easier. Maybe the sand is more accessible, requires less digging, allows for faster construction.

But when the storm comes—and it always comes—sand can't hold. The foundation fails. And when the foundation fails, everything built on it collapses.

"And great was its fall."

Not just "it fell." *Great* was its fall. Catastrophic. Total. Devastating. Because a house built on sand doesn't just get damaged in the storm. It's destroyed. Completely. The foundation gives way, and everything crumbles.

The Foundation That Holds

Paul makes explicit what Jesus illustrates:

"For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11, NASB).

There is only one foundation that can bear the weight of a human life, only one foundation that can withstand the storms of existence, only one foundation that lasts into eternity: Jesus Christ.

Not Jesus's teaching *plus* your own wisdom. Not Jesus's example *plus* your own effort. Not Jesus's sacrifice *plus* your own works.

Jesus Christ. Alone. Exclusively. He is the foundation.

And here's what's crucial: You don't create this foundation. You don't build it. You don't construct it. It's already laid. God laid it. Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, the foundation has been established. Your job isn't to create it but to build on it.

But what does it mean to build on Christ as foundation?

It means, as Jesus says, hearing His words and *acting on them*. Taking everything He taught—everything He commanded, everything He modeled, everything He revealed about God and life and eternity—and making that the basis of how you live.

Not adding Jesus to your existing life plan. Not incorporating some of His teaching into your personal philosophy. Not selectively choosing which of His words to follow.

Building on Him. Making Him the foundation. Letting His words, His will, His ways determine the structure of your entire existence.

This is radically different from what most people mean when they say they're Christians. Most people want Jesus as an addition to their lives, not as the foundation of their lives. They want Him to bless their plans, not replace their plans. They want to incorporate His teaching where convenient, not build everything on His teaching regardless of cost.

But Jesus says: You can't do that. You can't build a stable life on the sand of your own wisdom while claiming Christ as Savior. You can't mix foundations. You can't be partially on the rock and partially on the sand.

Either Christ is your foundation—the basis of everything, the rock upon which your entire life is built—or He's not. There's no middle ground.

What We Put First Instead

Jesus gives us the example of the foolish builder, but Scripture and human experience show us multiple ways people try to build without the right foundation.

The Foolish Builder: Convenience Over Stability

The foolish builder in Jesus's parable heard the same words as the wise builder. He was exposed to the same truth. He had the same opportunity to build on the rock.

But he chose sand instead. Why?

Jesus doesn't tell us explicitly, but we can infer. Building on sand is easier. It's more convenient. You don't have to dig down to rock. You don't have to do the hard work of excavation. You can start building immediately.

Rock requires effort. You have to dig through the sand, through the soil, down to the bedrock. It's slow. It's laborious. It's costly in time and energy.

Sand is right there on the surface. Ready. Accessible. Easy.

So the foolish builder chooses convenience over stability. Ease over security. Quick results over lasting foundation.

And when the storm comes, he discovers that convenience is a terrible foundation. That ease doesn't equal safety. That quick results mean quick collapse.

How many people build their lives this way? They hear Jesus's teaching. They're exposed to biblical truth. They know what God requires. But actually building on Christ as foundation seems too demanding, too costly, too inconvenient.

So they build on sand instead. On their own wisdom. On cultural values. On what feels right. On what's easy. On what everyone else is doing.

And they convince themselves it's fine. The house looks good. Life seems stable. Everything appears solid.

Until the storm comes. And then they discover that convenience isn't the same as security. That ease doesn't produce stability. That building quickly on sand is infinitely worse than building slowly on rock.

Those Who Built Without Foundation: Speed Over Security

Luke's version of this parable adds a detail:

"But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great" (Luke 6:49, NASB).

Without *any* foundation. Not even bad foundation. No foundation at all.

Some people don't just choose the wrong foundation. They skip the foundation entirely. They're so eager to build—to construct a life, to achieve, to accomplish, to appear successful—that they don't bother with foundations.

Foundations are slow. Invisible. Underground. Nobody sees them. They don't contribute to the impressive appearance of the house. They're just necessary infrastructure that takes time and resources away from the visible building.

So they skip them. Build directly on the ground. Focus all their energy on what shows. The parts people can see. The impressive façade. The appearance of success.

And "immediately" when the torrent comes, it collapses. Not even a gradual failure. *Immediate* collapse. Because without foundation, there's nothing to hold it together when pressure comes.

This is the person who pursues career success without building their life on Christ. Who chases wealth without making God their treasure. Who constructs an impressive external life while ignoring the internal reality of their relationship with God.

They're building without foundation. And when crisis comes—and it always comes—everything collapses. Immediately. Catastrophically.

Because a life built on achievement, or reputation, or wealth, or relationships, or anything other than Christ has no foundation. And without foundation, collapse is inevitable.

The House on Sand: Appearance Without Substance

Here's what's crucial to understand: Until the storm comes, both houses look the same.

The house built on rock and the house built on sand—from the outside, they're indistinguishable. Same construction. Same materials. Same external appearance. If you walk past them on a sunny day, you can't tell which is which.

The difference is invisible. Underground. Hidden in the foundation.

This is why so many people are deceived about the state of their spiritual lives. They look at their lives and think, "I'm doing fine. I go to church. I know the Bible. I serve in ministry. I'm a good person. My life looks stable."

But appearance isn't the same as substance. External religiosity isn't the same as being built on Christ. Looking like a Christian isn't the same as having Christ as your foundation.

The storm reveals the truth. Rain, floods, wind—these expose what was always there but couldn't be seen: either rock or sand. Either foundation or no foundation. Either Christ or something else.

And when the storm reveals sand where you thought there was rock, when crisis exposes the absence of foundation where you assumed there was stability, the fall is great.

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with this stark warning because He knows: You can hear all His teaching, appreciate all His wisdom, agree with all His truth, and still be building on sand if you're not actually acting on His words.

Knowledge isn't foundation. Agreement isn't foundation. Religious activity isn't foundation. Even correct theology isn't foundation.

Christ is the foundation. And building on Him means hearing His words and doing them. All of them. Without exception. Without qualification. Making Him the basis of everything.

Why Jesus Prioritizes the Foundation

Jesus doesn't prioritize the foundation to be difficult or demanding. He prioritizes it because the foundation determines everything else. Get it right, and what you build can last. Get it wrong, and everything collapses.

Foundation Determines Sustainability

In construction, the foundation determines what the building can become. You can't build a skyscraper on a foundation designed for a small house. You can't construct something that lasts centuries on a foundation that's unstable.

The foundation limits or enables everything built upon it.

The same is true spiritually. Your foundation determines what your life can become. What pressures it can withstand. What it can accomplish for eternity. Whether it survives the inevitable storms.

Build on Christ—hearing His words and acting on them—and your life has the capacity to become everything God designed it to be. To withstand any storm. To produce fruit that lasts. To count for eternity.

Build on anything else—your own wisdom, cultural values, human achievement, religious performance—and your life is fundamentally unstable. Limited in what it can become. Unable to withstand significant pressure. Destined to collapse when crisis comes.

Count Zinzendorf understood this: "I have one passion: It is He, it is He alone. The world is the field and the field is the world; and henceforth that country shall be my home where I can be most used in winning souls for Christ."

One passion. One foundation. Christ alone. Everything else built on that singular, stable, eternal foundation.

When Christ is your foundation—not one priority among many, but the foundation upon which everything else is built—your life has the capacity for eternal impact. But when He's not the foundation, when He's just an addition to a life built on something else, sustainability is impossible.

Christ Is the Only Secure Foundation

Paul's statement is absolute: "For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11, NASB).

No man can lay a foundation other than... Not "shouldn't." Not "it would be better not to." *Cannot.* It's impossible.

Why? Because only Christ can bear the weight. Only Christ is solid enough, strong enough, reliable enough to serve as foundation for a human life.

You cannot build a lasting life on:

- Your own wisdom—it's limited and fallible
- Human relationships—they're temporary and imperfect
- Wealth—it's fleeting and uncertain
- Achievement—it's ultimately meaningless
- Reputation—it's fragile and fickle
- Pleasure—it's transient and unsatisfying
- Power—it's corrupting and temporary

All of these are sand. They look solid. They feel substantial. But they cannot bear the weight of your existence. They cannot withstand the storms of life. They cannot last into eternity.

Only Christ. Only the one who is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8, NASB). Only the one who defeated death and holds the keys to eternal life. Only the one who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

He is the rock. Everything else is sand.

A.W. Tozer writes: "The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God."

Even Scripture isn't the foundation—Christ is. Scripture points to Him, reveals Him, teaches us about Him. But the foundation is the Person, not the book. The relationship, not the knowledge. Christ Himself, known and trusted and obeyed and loved.

That's the only foundation that holds. The only foundation that can bear the weight of your life. The only foundation that survives eternity.

What We Build On Determines What Survives

Paul continues the building metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3:

"Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:12-15, NASB).

Even on the right foundation—even building on Christ—what you build matters. Some materials survive the fire. Some don't.

Gold, silver, precious stones—these survive. Wood, hay, straw—these burn.

What's the difference? Permanence. Durability. Eternal value. The materials that survive are those that have lasting worth. The materials that burn are those that served temporary purposes but have no eternal significance.

This is sobering. You can build on the right foundation and still have much of what you built burn up because you built with the wrong materials. You can be genuinely saved—passing through fire "yet so as through fire"—but lose the reward of work that endures.

So not only must we build on the right foundation (Christ), we must build with the right materials (things that have eternal value).

What has eternal value? What survives the fire?

- Lives transformed by the gospel
- Character formed in Christlikeness
- Love that reflects God's love
- Obedience that honors Christ
- Service done for God's glory
- Truth proclaimed and lived
- Souls won for the kingdom
- Disciples made and matured

What doesn't survive?

- Impressive buildings that served our ego
- Programs that filled time but changed no lives
- Activity that looked spiritual but accomplished nothing eternal
- Achievements done for human applause
- Success measured by worldly standards

The foundation determines whether your life stands or falls. The materials determine whether your work survives or burns.

Build on Christ. Build with materials that last. Then when the storm comes and the fire tests your work, you'll stand and your work will remain.

The Way Forward: Building on the Rock Today

So how do we actually do this? How do we build on Christ as foundation? How do we ensure we're the wise builder, not the foolish one?

Hear AND Act on Jesus's Words

Jesus is explicit: "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and *acts on them*" (Matthew 7:24, NASB, emphasis added).

Both are necessary. Hearing alone isn't enough. Acting without hearing isn't building on Christ—it's just building.

But hearing Jesus's words and acting on them—that's building on the rock.

This means:

- **Regularly saturate yourself in Scripture.** You can't act on words you haven't heard. You can't obey teaching you don't know. Immerse yourself in the Gospels. Study Jesus's teaching. Meditate on His words.
- **Don't just study—obey.** Information without application is sand. Knowledge without obedience is a foundation that won't hold. Every time you read Scripture, ask: "What is Jesus calling me to do? How does this apply to my life? Where do I need to change?"
- **Obey completely, not selectively.** You don't get to choose which of Jesus's words to build on. The wise builder doesn't say, "I'll act on the teachings I like and ignore the ones that are inconvenient." All of Christ's teaching becomes your foundation, or none of it does.

Make Christ the Basis of Every Decision

Building on Christ as foundation means He's the reference point for everything. Every decision gets filtered through the question: "What does Christ say about this? What would obedience to Him look like here?"

Not: "What do I want? What seems reasonable? What does culture say? What will people think?"

But: "What does Christ teach? What does His Word say? What would it mean to obey Him in this situation?"

This applies to:

- **Career decisions.** Not just "what pays the most" but "where can I best serve God's kingdom?"
- **Financial decisions.** Not just "what can I afford" but "what does stewardship of God's resources require?"
- **Relationship decisions.** Not just "who makes me happy" but "who helps me follow Christ?"
- **Everyday choices.** How you spend your time, what you watch, how you speak, what you pursue—all filtered through Christ's teaching.

When Christ is truly your foundation, He influences everything. Because a foundation isn't just the starting point—it's the basis upon which everything else is built.

Prepare for the Storm

Notice Jesus doesn't say "if" the storm comes. He says "*when* the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew" (Matthew 7:25, NASB).

The storm is coming. For everyone. The wise builder and the foolish builder both face the same storm.

The difference isn't whether you face hardship. The difference is whether your foundation holds when hardship comes.

So don't build on Christ expecting an easy life. Don't make Him your foundation thinking it protects you from all difficulty. It doesn't.

What it does is ensure that when the storm comes—when crisis hits, when suffering arrives, when loss devastates, when pressure mounts—you have a foundation that holds. A rock beneath you that doesn't shift. A stability that isn't shaken by circumstances.

Prepare for the storm by building on the rock now. Because you can't change your foundation during the storm. You can't dig down to rock while the floods are rising. The time to build on Christ is before the crisis, not during it.

Build for Eternity, Not Just for Time

Remember: Everything built on Christ survives. Everything built on anything else eventually collapses.

So build with eternity in view. Make decisions that matter forever, not just for the moment. Invest in things that last, not just things that impress.

This means prioritizing:

- **Relationship with God over religious activity.** Intimacy with Christ matters forever. Church attendance, by itself, doesn't.
- **Character over achievement.** Who you're becoming in Christ matters forever. What you accomplish for human applause doesn't.
- **Kingdom impact over worldly success.** Souls reached and disciples made matter forever. Titles, wealth, and recognition don't.
- **Obedience over comfort.** Doing what Christ says matters forever. Avoiding difficulty and maintaining ease don't.

When you build on Christ, build with materials that survive the fire. Invest your life in things that have eternal value.

Examine Your Foundation Honestly

Here's the uncomfortable question: What is your life actually built on?

Not what you say it's built on. Not what you think it's built on. What is it *actually* built on?

If Christ were removed from your life—if you woke up tomorrow and He was no longer part of the equation—what would change?

Would your whole life collapse? Or would most of it continue exactly as before?

If removing Christ wouldn't fundamentally alter your daily decisions, your priorities, your pursuits, your relationships—He's not your foundation. He might be an addition to your life. He might be important to you. But He's not the rock upon which everything is built.

Be honest. What's actually the basis of your life? What's the foundation you've built on?

And if it's not Christ—if you're building on sand, or building without foundation—there's still time to tear down and rebuild. Costly? Yes. Humbling? Absolutely. But infinitely better than waiting for the storm to reveal what you should have addressed in the calm.

Remember: The Foundation Is Already Laid

Finally, this is crucial: You don't have to create the foundation. Christ is already the rock. God has already laid the foundation through Christ's finished work.

Your job isn't to make Christ into a suitable foundation. He already is. Your job is to build on Him. To make Him the basis of your life. To hear His words and act on them.

The foundation is secure. The rock is solid. Christ has done everything necessary to be your stability, your support, your unshakeable foundation.

The question is: Will you build on Him?

The Storm That Reveals All

Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount with this parable because He knows: Eventually, the storm comes. For everyone.

It might be sudden crisis. Illness. Death. Financial collapse. Relationship implosion. Persecution. Suffering.

Or it might be the final storm—standing before God, when everything you built is tested by fire to see what remains.

Either way, the storm reveals what the calm concealed: whether you built on rock or sand. Whether Christ was truly your foundation or just an addition to a life built on something else.

And when that storm comes—when the rain falls and the floods rise and the winds slam against your life—only one thing will determine whether you stand or fall: the foundation.

Not your good intentions. Not your religious activities. Not your moral performance. Not your knowledge. Not your achievements.

The foundation. What your life is actually built on. Whether you heard Christ's words and acted on them, or heard and did nothing.

The wise builder stands. Not because the storm was easier. Not because they're stronger. But because they built on the rock. And rock holds when everything else gives way.

The foolish builder falls. Not because they didn't hear Christ's words. Not because they didn't build a life. But because they built on sand. And sand cannot hold when the storm comes.

"And great was its fall."

There is no neutral option. No middle ground. You're building on rock or on sand. Christ is your foundation or something else is. You hear His words and act on them, or you hear and ignore them.

And the choice you make determines everything.

So build on the rock. Build on Christ. Hear His words and obey them. Make Him the foundation—not an addition, not one priority among many, but the actual basis upon which everything else in your life is constructed.

Because when the storm comes—and it's coming—only the rock will hold.

And only those built on the rock will stand.

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock."

– Matthew 7:24-25, NASB

CONCLUSION: The Revolution of First Things

We've journeyed through Scripture examining what Jesus and His apostles consistently placed first—the priorities that must precede everything else, the foundations that must be laid before building can begin, the order that cannot be reversed without catastrophic consequences.

Seek first the kingdom. Remove first the log from your own eye. Be reconciled first to your brother. Love God first with all your heart. Love one another first as Christ loved you. Repent first. Believe first. Lose your life first to find it. Count the cost first before following. Clean first the inside of the cup. Go first to the lost sheep. Understand that first the natural, then the spiritual. Build first on the rock.

In every case, Jesus establishes an order. A priority. A sequence that reflects divine wisdom and produces life when followed, chaos when reversed.

The world tells us to put ourselves first. Our comfort first. Our success first. Our plans first. Our preferences first.

Jesus says put God first. His kingdom first. His will first. His ways first. His glory first.

And in that reversal—in that revolutionary reordering of priorities—we discover something shocking: When we put God first, we gain everything we were looking for when we put ourselves first. When we seek first His kingdom, everything else is added. When we lose our lives for His sake, we find them.

The "first things" aren't arbitrary demands from a controlling God. They're invitations to life. To freedom. To joy. To the abundant existence we were created for.

But they require the courage to trust God's order over our instincts. To believe that His priorities are better than ours. To put first what He says comes first, even when everything in us screams to reverse the sequence.

This book is an invitation to that revolution. To examine your life against the pattern Jesus established. To ask honestly: What am I putting first? And is it what Jesus said comes first?

The order matters. First things must come first. Not second. Not eventually. Not when convenient.

First.

Because when you get the first things right, everything else finds its proper place. But when you get the first things wrong, nothing else works—no matter how hard you try.

So start at the beginning. Put first what Jesus said comes first. Build on the foundation He laid. Follow the order He established.

And discover that His way—however counterintuitive, however costly, however contrary to human wisdom—is the only way that leads to life.

The abundant, eternal, joy-filled life He came to give to all who would seek first His kingdom.

PART SEVEN: THE PRIORITY OF PRESENCE

Chapter 14: First Sit at His Feet

Luke 10:38-42

The One Thing Necessary

Jesus is traveling with His disciples through a village. A woman named Martha welcomes Him into her home. It's an act of hospitality, of generosity, of devotion. She wants to serve the Lord. She wants everything to be perfect for Him.

And she has a sister named Mary.

Here's what happens:

"Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, 'Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her'" (Luke 10:38-42, NASB).

Two sisters. Two responses to Jesus's presence. Two completely different priorities.

Martha is serving. Working. Busy with preparations. Distracted with activity. Doing things *for* Jesus.

Mary is sitting. Listening. Focused on Jesus Himself. Absorbing His teaching. Being *with* Jesus.

And when Martha complains that Mary should be helping instead of sitting, Jesus's response is stunning:

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary."

One thing. Not ten things. Not balancing multiple priorities. Not managing competing demands. *One thing* is necessary.

And Mary has chosen it.

What is that one thing? Sitting at Jesus's feet. Listening to His word. Being present with Him. Choosing relationship over activity. Choosing to be with Him before doing for Him.

This is one of the most countercultural, productivity-defying, busyness-challenging statements Jesus ever made. And He makes it to someone who's serving Him. Someone who's working hard for Him. Someone whose motivations are pure and whose intentions are good.

He says: "You're worried and bothered about so many things. But only one thing is necessary. And your sister has chosen it."

First sit at My feet. Then serve. First be with Me. Then work for Me. First presence. Then activity.

The order matters. Because presence fuels service. Being precedes doing. Intimacy empowers activity. And when you reverse the order—when you serve without sitting, when you work without worship, when you're so busy doing things for Jesus that you have no time to be with Jesus—you end up like Martha: worried, bothered, distracted, and missing the one thing that's actually necessary.

Martha's Distraction

Let's be clear: Martha wasn't doing anything wrong. Serving Jesus is good. Hospitality is biblical. Working hard for the Lord is commendable. Her motivations weren't selfish. Her activity wasn't sinful.

But it wasn't the one thing necessary.

Luke tells us Martha "was distracted with all her preparations" (Luke 10:40, NASB).

The word for "distracted" is *perispao*—to be pulled away, to be over-occupied, to be too busy. And the word for "preparations" is *diakonia*—service, ministry, the work of serving.

Martha was being pulled away by service. Over-occupied with ministry. Too busy with doing for Jesus to simply be with Jesus.

This is the subtle danger of Christian activity. It's possible to be so busy serving Jesus that you neglect sitting with Jesus. So consumed with doing good things that you miss the one necessary thing. So distracted by ministry that you lose intimacy.

And Jesus says: That's backwards. The order is wrong. Sitting comes first. Being present comes first. Listening to My word comes first. *Then serve. Then work. Then minister.*

Notice Martha's complaint: "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me" (Luke 10:40, NASB).

"Do You not care?" In other words: "Jesus, I'm doing all this work for You, and You don't even notice? I'm serving You, and You don't appreciate it? I'm the one being productive, and You're letting Mary just sit there?"

There's frustration. Resentment. Self-pity. The poison that seeps into service when it's divorced from presence.

Because when you serve without sitting at Jesus's feet, when you work for Him without being with Him, service becomes burdensome. It produces worry and bother, not joy and peace. It creates frustration with others who aren't as busy as you, rather than celebration of what God is doing.

Martha was serving Jesus but she was worried and bothered. Mary was sitting with Jesus and she was peaceful and present.

One was distracted by many things. The other was focused on the one thing.

And Jesus says Mary chose better.

Mary's Devotion

"She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word" (Luke 10:39, NASB).

Seated. At His feet. Listening. Present. Focused.

This is the posture of a disciple. In Jewish culture, sitting at a teacher's feet meant being their student. Learning from them. Absorbing their teaching. Receiving their wisdom.

Mary took the position of a disciple—unusual for a woman in that culture—and simply listened. She wasn't doing anything productive by Martha's standards. She wasn't serving. She wasn't preparing food. She wasn't accomplishing tasks.

She was just being present with Jesus.

And Jesus says this is the good part. The one thing necessary. The choice that will not be taken away from her.

Why is this so important? Why does Jesus prioritize sitting at His feet over serving Him?

Because relationship precedes activity. Because you cannot truly serve someone you don't know. Because the work flows from the worship. Because doing for Jesus only has meaning when it flows from being with Jesus.

Mary wasn't being lazy. She wasn't avoiding responsibility. She wasn't neglecting important work.

She was prioritizing the one thing that would make all the work meaningful. The one thing that would fuel sustainable service. The one thing that couldn't be taken away from her—intimate knowledge of Jesus gained through time spent in His presence.

David understood this priority:

"One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to meditate in His temple" (Psalm 27:4, NASB).

One thing. In a psalm full of requests and needs—protection from enemies, rescue from danger, guidance in difficult times—David says there's one thing he asks for above all else: to dwell in God's presence. To behold His beauty. To be with Him.

Not to serve Him from a distance. Not to work for Him while distracted by many things. To be *with* Him. To sit in His presence. To meditate on Him. To know Him.

This is what Mary chose. And Jesus says it's the good part. The necessary part. The part that won't be taken away.

The Gentle Rebuke

Notice Jesus's tone with Martha: "Martha, Martha..."

He repeats her name. It's not harsh. It's gentle. Tender. Almost sorrowful. Like a parent who sees their child working so hard but missing the point.

He doesn't condemn her service. He doesn't criticize her efforts. He doesn't tell her the work doesn't matter.

He says: "You are worried and bothered about so many things."

Worried. Anxious. Troubled. Distracted by concerns.

Bothered. Troubled. Agitated. Disturbed.

So many things. Not just one thing. Many things. Multiple concerns. Competing demands. A long list of tasks and preparations.

This is what happens when you serve without sitting. When you work without worship. When you're so busy doing things for Jesus that you neglect being with Jesus.

You become worried. Bothered. Anxious. Distracted. Focused on so many things that you miss the one thing.

And Jesus says: "Only one thing is necessary."

Not ten things. Not five things. Not even two things. *One* thing.

What is it? The thing Mary chose. Sitting at His feet. Being in His presence. Listening to His word. Knowing Him.

Everything else—all the service, all the work, all the activity—flows from that one thing. Build your life on that one thing, and everything else finds its proper place. Miss that one thing, and all the service in the world becomes worry and bother.

"Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

The *good* part. Not just an acceptable option. The *good* part. The better part. The necessary part.

And it "shall not be taken away from her." Service can be interrupted. Tasks can be prevented. Work can be hindered. But time spent at Jesus's feet, listening to His word, being transformed by His presence—that can never be taken away.

What you gain in the presence of Jesus becomes part of who you are. It changes you internally. Transforms you spiritually. Becomes treasured possession that no circumstance, no crisis, no difficulty can steal.

Martha's service could be interrupted. Her preparations could be disrupted. Her work could be undone.

But Mary's intimate knowledge of Jesus, gained through sitting at His feet? That was hers forever.

What We Put First Instead

The Martha Syndrome is epidemic in Christianity. We're busy. We're serving. We're working hard for Jesus. And we're missing the one thing necessary because we've reversed the order.

Martha: Service Before Presence

Martha genuinely loved Jesus. She welcomed Him into her home. She wanted to serve Him well. She was working hard to honor Him with her hospitality.

But she put service before presence. Doing before being. Activity before intimacy.

And the result? Worry. Bother. Distraction. Resentment toward her sister. Frustration with Jesus for not making Mary help.

This is what happens when you reverse the order. When you try to serve Jesus without first sitting with Jesus. When you attempt to work for Him without being with Him.

Service becomes burdensome instead of joyful. Work becomes draining instead of energizing. Activity becomes a source of anxiety instead of an overflow of abundance.

And you end up resenting others who seem less busy, less productive, less active—because they're not carrying the same burden you've placed on yourself by reversing God's order.

How many Christians are living like Martha? Frantically serving. Constantly busy. Always working for Jesus but never sitting with Jesus. Exhausted by ministry. Burned out by service. Worried and bothered about so many things.

And Jesus is gently saying to them—to us—what He said to Martha: "You're focused on so many things. But only one thing is necessary. Stop serving Me long enough to sit with Me. Stop working for Me long enough to be with Me. The service will be sustainable when it flows from presence. But presence must come first."

The Disciples in Gethsemane: Sleep Before Prayer

On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to the Garden of Gethsemane. He's in anguish. He's about to face the cross. He needs prayer support. He needs someone to watch with Him.

He tells them: "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me" (Matthew 26:38, NASB).

Then He goes a little farther and prays. And when He returns? They're asleep.

"And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, 'So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak'" (Matthew 26:40-41, NASB).

One hour. Jesus asked them to stay awake and pray with Him for one hour. And they couldn't do it. They fell asleep.

Three times Jesus goes to pray. Three times He returns to find them sleeping.

Why? "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

They wanted to stay awake. They intended to pray. But they were tired. Physically exhausted. And when the spirit and the flesh compete, the flesh often wins—unless we've disciplined ourselves to prioritize presence with Jesus above physical comfort.

The disciples put sleep before prayer. Physical comfort before spiritual vigilance. Natural needs before supernatural priorities.

And when the crisis came—when the soldiers arrived to arrest Jesus—they weren't ready. They hadn't been watching. They hadn't been praying. And they all fled (Matthew 26:56).

Because you cannot face spiritual battles when you've neglected spiritual preparation. You cannot stand firm when you haven't sat at Jesus's feet. You cannot fight effectively when you've prioritized sleep over prayer, comfort over presence, physical needs over spiritual communion.

How many Christians make the same choice every day? Not necessarily literal sleep, but choosing comfort over presence. Choosing entertainment over prayer. Choosing busyness over quiet time with Jesus. Choosing everything else over the one thing necessary.

And then wondering why they fall apart when crisis comes. Why they're spiritually unprepared. Why they lack the strength to stand.

It's because they didn't sit at Jesus's feet first. They didn't watch and pray. They didn't prioritize presence.

The Busy Religious: Activity Over Intimacy

Jesus confronts the Pharisees for this exact error:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others" (Matthew 23:23, NASB).

They were meticulous about religious activity. They tithed down to the individual seed. They followed every rule. They maintained every tradition.

But they neglected what actually mattered. Justice. Mercy. Faithfulness. Relationship with God. Love for others. The heart issues that flow from knowing God intimately.

They prioritized activity over intimacy. Performance over presence. Religious duty over relational devotion.

And Jesus calls them hypocrites. Not because religious activity is bad, but because it's worthless when divorced from genuine relationship with God.

You can pray eloquent prayers while never actually communing with God. You can read Scripture daily while never sitting at Jesus's feet to listen. You can serve in ministry while never being transformed by the One you're serving. You can be busy with religious activity while having no intimacy with God.

And Jesus says: That's not what I want. I don't want your performance without your presence. I don't want your service without your sitting. I don't want you so busy doing things for Me that you have no time to be with Me.

Activity is not the same as intimacy. Busyness is not the same as devotion. Religious performance is not the same as sitting at Jesus's feet.

And when you put activity before intimacy, you end up with what the Pharisees had: meticulous external religion with dead internal reality.

Why Jesus Prioritizes Presence

Jesus doesn't prioritize sitting at His feet to make us less productive or to discourage service. He prioritizes presence because it's the foundation for everything else.

Relationship Precedes Activity

You cannot truly serve someone you don't know. You cannot effectively work for someone you've never spent time with. You cannot represent someone whose heart you've never understood.

Relationship must come first. Knowing Jesus precedes serving Jesus. Being with Him empowers doing for Him.

The disciples were effective not because they were naturally gifted or extraordinarily talented. They were effective because they spent three years sitting at Jesus's feet. Walking with Him. Listening to Him. Watching Him. Being with Him.

And out of that intimacy came authority. Out of that presence came power. Out of that relationship came effectiveness.

They knew Him. They had absorbed His teaching. They had observed His character. They had been transformed by His presence.

And *then* they went out to serve. *Then* they preached the gospel. *Then* they made disciples.

But sitting at His feet came first. Being with Him preceded doing for Him.

A.W. Tozer writes: "God is not looking for extraordinary characters as His instruments, but He is looking for humble instruments through whom He can be honored throughout the ages."

God doesn't need your impressive résumé or your natural talents. He needs your availability. Your willingness to sit at His feet. Your commitment to prioritize presence over activity.

Because when you truly know Him, when you've spent time in His presence, when you've sat at His feet and been transformed—He can use you. He can work through you. He can accomplish His purposes in you.

But it starts with relationship. With presence. With sitting at His feet.

Presence Fuels Service

Martha was serving, but she was worried and bothered. Her service wasn't sustainable. It wasn't joyful. It was draining her, frustrating her, creating resentment.

Why? Because her service wasn't fueled by presence. She was working for Jesus without drawing strength from being with Jesus.

And that kind of service eventually burns you out.

But when service flows from presence—when you work for Jesus out of the overflow of being with Jesus—it's sustainable. Joyful. Life-giving.

Because you're not serving in your own strength. You're serving in the strength you gain from sitting at His feet. You're not working to earn His approval. You're working because you've experienced His love. You're not performing to prove your worth. You're serving because you've been transformed by His presence.

Jesus Himself modeled this. Throughout the Gospels, we see Him withdrawing to pray. Spending time alone with the Father. Prioritizing presence even when the crowds were demanding His attention.

"But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray" (Luke 5:16, NASB).

"In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there" (Mark 1:35, NASB).

Jesus—the Son of God, full of the Spirit without measure—still prioritized time alone with the Father. Still sat in the Father's presence. Still withdrew from activity to commune with God.

Why? Because presence fuels service. Because intimacy empowers ministry. Because what you receive in the Father's presence enables what you do in the Father's work.

If Jesus needed this, how much more do we?

Being Comes Before Doing

This is the fundamental truth Martha missed and Mary understood: Who you are matters more than what you do. Being precedes doing. Character comes before activity.

Jesus doesn't primarily want your work. He wants your heart. He doesn't primarily want your service. He wants your love. He doesn't primarily want you to do things for Him. He wants you to be with Him.

And when you prioritize being with Him—when you sit at His feet, listen to His word, are transformed by His presence—the doing follows naturally. The service flows. The work happens. But it's different. It's fueled by intimacy rather than driven by obligation.

Tozer also writes: "If you do not worship God seven days a week, you do not worship Him on one day a week."

True worship—true presence with God—isn't just a Sunday morning activity. It's a way of life. A posture of the heart. A continuous sitting at His feet even while you're standing and serving.

You can be physically active while spiritually sitting at Jesus's feet. You can be busy with work while your heart is focused on Him. You can serve productively while maintaining intimate communion with Him.

But you have to establish that intimacy first. You have to learn to sit at His feet. You have to prioritize presence. You have to choose being with Him over doing for Him.

Then—from that foundation—doing becomes the overflow of being. Service becomes the fruit of intimacy. Activity flows from relationship rather than substituting for it.

The Way Forward: Sitting at His Feet Today

So how do we actually do this? How do we prioritize presence? How do we choose the "one thing necessary" in a world that demands so many things?

Schedule Time to Sit at His Feet

If it's not scheduled, it won't happen. If you don't intentionally create space to sit at Jesus's feet, activity will fill every moment.

Make it non-negotiable. Not something you fit in if you have time left over, but the first thing. The priority around which everything else is scheduled.

Whether it's early morning, lunch break, evening—find a time when you can be present with Jesus. No distractions. No multitasking. Just you and Him.

Read Scripture not to check a box but to hear His voice. Pray not to fulfill a duty but to commune with Him. Sit in silence and listen. Meditate on His character. Worship Him.

This isn't wasted time. This isn't unproductive. This is the one thing necessary. This is what fuels everything else. This is what transforms you from worried and bothered to peaceful and present.

Learn to Be Present

In our distracted age, simply being present is a skill that must be learned. We're so used to multitasking, to constant input, to divided attention that sitting still and focusing on one thing feels impossible.

But Mary sat at Jesus's feet and listened. Present. Focused. Undistracted.

Practice this. When you're spending time with God, silence your phone. Close the laptop. Turn off notifications. Remove distractions.

Be fully present. Not thinking about your to-do list. Not mentally rehearsing conversations. Not planning your day. Just present with Jesus.

This takes practice. Your mind will wander. You'll think of urgent tasks. You'll feel the pull of activity.

But keep returning to presence. Keep choosing to sit at His feet. Keep prioritizing the one thing over the many things.

Over time, it becomes easier. The discipline of presence trains your heart to prioritize intimacy over activity, being over doing, relationship over productivity.

Let Presence Transform Your Service

As you spend time sitting at Jesus's feet, pay attention to how it changes your service.

Does it become more joyful? Less anxious? More sustainable? More fruitful?

When service flows from presence, it feels different. You're no longer working to earn approval. You're serving from a place of acceptance. You're not striving to prove your worth. You're ministering from an overflow of love.

Let this transformation happen. Let time at Jesus's feet change not just what you do but how and why you do it.

And when you notice yourself becoming worried and bothered about so many things—when service starts feeling burdensome and resentment creeps in—recognize it as a sign: You've reversed the order. You're serving without sitting. You're working without worshiping. You're doing for Jesus without being with Jesus.

Stop. Return to His feet. Choose the one thing necessary. Let presence fuel your service again.

Guard Against the Martha Syndrome

Be vigilant about the creep of activity over intimacy. It's subtle. You start with good intentions—wanting to serve Jesus well. But gradually, the serving crowds out the sitting. The doing overtakes the being. The many things squeeze out the one thing.

And before you know it, you're Martha—busy, worried, bothered, resentful.

Guard against this. Regularly assess: Am I spending more time doing things for Jesus than being with Jesus? Am I so busy serving that I'm neglecting sitting?

And if the answer is yes—stop. Reprioritize. Choose what Mary chose. Sit at His feet. Listen to His word. Be present with Him.

Because the service will still be there. The work will still need doing. But it will be sustainable and joyful only when it flows from presence.

Remember: This Is What Jesus Wants

Finally, remember that sitting at Jesus's feet isn't just what you need. It's what Jesus wants.

He didn't rebuke Martha for loving Him or wanting to serve Him. He rebuked her for missing the point. For being so busy doing things for Him that she had no time to be with Him.

Jesus wants your presence more than your service. Your love more than your work. Your heart more than your hands.

Not because He doesn't value service—He does. But because service without relationship is empty. Work without intimacy is unsustainable. Activity without presence misses the whole point.

He came to seek and save the lost so they could be with Him. So they could know Him. So they could experience relationship with God.

That's what He wants. Your presence. Your attention. Your heart. You, sitting at His feet, listening to His word, being transformed by His love.

And when you give Him that—when you prioritize presence, when you choose the one thing necessary—everything else finds its proper place.

The Good Part

Mary chose the good part. The necessary part. The part that won't be taken away.

She chose to sit at Jesus's feet while Martha worked in the kitchen. She chose presence while Martha chose activity. She chose being while Martha chose doing.

And Jesus said she chose better.

Not because work doesn't matter. Not because service isn't important. Not because hospitality and ministry and doing things for Jesus are worthless.

But because presence comes first. Because relationship precedes activity. Because who you are with Jesus determines the value of what you do for Jesus.

Sitting at His feet isn't laziness. It's not wasted time. It's not unproductive.

It's the one thing necessary. The foundation for everything else. The source from which sustainable, joyful, effective service flows.

Many things compete for your attention. Many demands pull at you. Many voices call you to activity, productivity, service.

But only one thing is necessary.

Sit at His feet. Listen to His word. Be present with Him. Choose relationship over activity. Choose intimacy over busyness. Choose the one thing over the many things.

Because what you gain there—in His presence, at His feet—can never be taken from you.

And everything else worth doing flows from that one necessary thing.

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

– Luke 10:41-42, NASB

Chapter 15: First Abide in Him

John 15:1-8

The Night Before the Cross

It's Thursday evening. Jesus and His disciples have just finished the Last Supper. Judas has left to betray Him. In a matter of hours, Jesus will be arrested, tried, beaten, and crucified. He knows what's coming. And He knows His disciples are about to face the greatest crisis of their lives.

So what does He choose to teach them in these final hours? What's the most important thing they need to understand before He goes to the cross?

He tells them about a vine and branches.

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:1-5, NASB).

In these final moments before His death, Jesus doesn't give them a strategic plan for ministry. He doesn't outline a program for evangelism. He doesn't lay out a five-year vision for church growth.

He tells them: *Abide in Me.*

Stay connected. Remain attached. Don't try to live independently. Don't attempt to bear fruit on your own. Don't think you can accomplish anything apart from Me.

Because just as a branch severed from the vine withers and dies and bears no fruit, you cannot produce anything of spiritual value unless you remain vitally connected to Me.

Abide in Me. Stay in Me. Remain in Me. Live in continuous, dependent, intimate connection with Me.

This is not one priority among many. This is the foundation for everything else. The prerequisite for all fruitfulness. The source of spiritual life and power.

Apart from Me, Jesus says, you can do *nothing*.

Not "you'll be less effective." Not "it will be harder." *Nothing*. Zero. No spiritual fruit. No eternal impact. No kingdom advancement.

Abiding comes first. Not service. Not activity. Not programs or strategies or hard work. *Abiding*. Connection. Remaining in Christ.

Everything else flows from that. Nothing else works without it.

The Vine and the Branches

The metaphor is simple but profound. A vine with branches. The vine provides everything the branches need—nutrients, water, life itself. The branches receive what the vine provides and, as a result, produce fruit.

But here's what's crucial: The branches cannot produce fruit on their own. They don't generate life from within themselves. They don't manufacture grapes through effort or willpower. They bear fruit *because* they're connected to the vine.

Sever the connection, and the branch withers. No matter how impressive the branch looked while connected, once it's cut off, it dies. It becomes firewood. It's thrown into the fire (John 15:6).

The branch has one job: remain connected. Abide. Stay attached. Draw life from the vine.

And when it does that—when it abides—fruit comes naturally. Not through striving or straining, but as the inevitable result of life flowing from the vine through the branch.

Jesus says: "I am the vine, you are the branches."

He is the source. We are the recipients. He provides life. We receive it. He produces fruit through us. We bear it by remaining connected to Him.

This is the fundamental reality of Christian life: We have no spiritual life apart from Christ. No ability to produce anything of eternal value apart from Him. No power, no fruitfulness, no effectiveness except what flows from abiding in Him.

And the word Jesus uses—*abide*—is critical. The Greek word is *menō*: to remain, to stay, to dwell, to continue, to be held, to endure.

It's not a brief visit. It's not an occasional connection. It's sustained, continuous, ongoing, permanent attachment.

You don't visit the vine periodically and hope to bear fruit. You remain in the vine. Constantly. Continuously. Your entire life is lived in connection to Christ.

This is first. Before you serve, before you minister, before you attempt anything for God—abide. Remain connected. Live in continuous dependence on Christ as your source of life.

The Command and the Promise

Notice the structure of Jesus's teaching. There's a command and a promise.

The Command: "Abide in Me" (John 15:4, NASB).

The Promise: "He who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit" (John 15:5, NASB).

The command is simple: Abide. Remain. Stay connected.

The promise is guaranteed: Abide, and you will bear much fruit.

Not "you might bear fruit." Not "try hard and maybe you'll be fruitful." Abide, and you *will* bear fruit. Guaranteed. Because fruit is the natural result of life flowing from the vine through the branch.

But then comes the sobering reality: "Apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, NASB).

Nothing. This is not hyperbole. This is literal truth. Apart from Christ—severed from the vine, living independently, trying to generate spiritual life and fruit through your own effort—you can do nothing of eternal value.

You might be busy. You might be productive by human standards. You might accomplish impressive things that earn recognition and applause. But spiritually? Eternally? Kingdom purposes? *Nothing.*

Because spiritual fruit can only come from spiritual life. And spiritual life only flows from Christ. And receiving that life requires abiding in Him.

This is why abiding must come first. Not because Jesus is being demanding or restrictive. But because it's the nature of reality. Branches don't produce fruit independently. They produce fruit by remaining connected to the vine.

You are a branch. Christ is the vine. Stay connected, and you'll bear fruit. Sever the connection, and you'll produce nothing—no matter how hard you work.

What We Put First Instead

The human tendency—even among sincere Christians—is to try producing fruit through our own effort rather than abiding in Christ. We want to serve Him, work for Him, accomplish things for His kingdom. But we try to do it in our own strength, through our own abilities, by our own initiative.

We put activity before abiding. Doing before being connected. Service before remaining in the vine.

And Jesus says: It doesn't work. Apart from Me, you can do nothing.

Peter's Self-Reliance: Confidence in Self Before Christ

Hours after Jesus taught about abiding, Peter demonstrated what happens when you trust yourself instead of remaining in Christ.

Jesus tells the disciples they will all fall away. Peter objects:

"Peter said to Him, 'Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.' Jesus said to him, 'Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.' Peter said to Him, 'Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You'" (Matthew 26:33-35, NASB).

Peter was confident. Sincere. Absolutely certain of his own loyalty, his own courage, his own ability to stand firm.

He was trusting himself. His own strength. His own commitment. His own determination.

And within hours, he denied Jesus three times. Exactly as Jesus predicted.

Why? Because Peter wasn't abiding. He was relying on his own strength instead of Christ's. Trusting his own courage instead of remaining dependent on Christ's power.

And self-reliance always fails. Always. Because apart from Christ, we can do nothing—not even stand firm in crisis, not even remain faithful under pressure, not even keep the promises we make with absolute sincerity.

After the resurrection, Jesus restores Peter. And notice what Jesus emphasizes:

"Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" Three times Jesus asks. Three times Peter answers. And three times Jesus says: "Tend My lambs... Shepherd My sheep... Tend My sheep" (John 21:15-17, NASB).

Jesus is reconnecting Peter to Himself. Reestablishing the relationship. Bringing Peter back to abiding before sending him back to serving.

Because service without abiding is self-reliance. And self-reliance leads to denial, failure, fruitlessness.

But abiding in Christ—trusting Him, depending on Him, drawing all your strength and life from Him—that produces fruit. That creates sustainable service. That enables you to stand when your own strength would fail.

The Fruitless Branch: Independence Over Dependence

Jesus mentions this sobering reality:

"Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away" (John 15:2, NASB).

A branch *in* the vine that doesn't bear fruit. How is that possible?

It's the branch that's physically attached but not truly abiding. Going through the motions of connection without actually drawing life from the vine. Present in the vine but not dependent on the vine.

This is the person who's in the church, in the community of believers, outwardly connected to Christ—but not truly abiding. Not actually drawing their life from Him. Not depending on Him. Not remaining in intimate, sustained connection.

They're trying to bear fruit independently. Through their own effort. By their own strength. In their own power.

And Jesus says they don't bear fruit. Because branches don't produce grapes on their own. Fruit only comes from life flowing from the vine.

Later Jesus warns: "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned" (John 15:6, NASB).

The branch that doesn't abide—that tries to live independently, that severs connection with the vine—witheres. Dies. Becomes firewood.

This is the tragedy of independence from Christ. You might start well. You might have been genuinely connected at one point. But if you stop abiding—if you shift from dependence to self-reliance, from drawing life from Christ to generating it yourself—you become fruitless. And eventually, lifeless.

Because there is no spiritual life apart from Christ. No fruitfulness apart from abiding in Him. No kingdom effectiveness apart from continuous, dependent connection to the vine.

Those Who Trust in Works: Activity Without Abiding

Perhaps the most sobering passage in Scripture is Matthew 7:21-23, where Jesus describes people who did impressive religious work but never knew Him:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your

name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (NASB).

These people prophesied. Cast out demons. Performed miracles. All in Jesus's name. All impressive spiritual activity.

But Jesus says: "I never knew you."

They were active without abiding. Busy without connection. Producing religious results without actually remaining in Christ.

And all their work—all their miracles, all their ministry, all their impressive spiritual activity—was worthless. Because it didn't flow from abiding in Christ. It was done in their own strength, for their own purposes, without genuine connection to the vine.

This is the danger Oswald Chambers warned against: "The greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service for Jesus."

Service can replace devotion. Activity can substitute for intimacy. Doing things for Jesus can become a way of avoiding actually being with Jesus.

And when that happens—when you're so busy serving that you neglect abiding, when you're so consumed with Christian work that you have no time for connection with Christ—you end up fruitless. Despite all the activity. Despite all the busyness. Despite all the impressive ministry.

Because fruit doesn't come from activity. It comes from abiding.

Why Jesus Prioritizes Abiding

Jesus makes abiding the first priority not to limit your effectiveness but to enable it. Not to restrict your service but to make it sustainable. Not to keep you from bearing fruit but to ensure you bear *much* fruit.

Connection Precedes Fruitfulness

This is the inescapable reality of the vine and branch relationship: Connection comes before production. Abiding precedes fruitfulness. Remaining in the vine is the prerequisite for bearing fruit.

You cannot reverse this order. You cannot bear fruit and then connect to the vine. You cannot produce first and abide second. The sequence is fixed by nature: first abide, then bear fruit.

This applies to everything in Christian life:

Evangelism: You cannot effectively share Christ if you're not abiding in Christ. Your words might be correct, but they'll lack power. Your presentation might be polished, but it won't carry the life that only comes from the vine.

Ministry: You cannot serve sustainably if you're not remaining in Christ. You'll burn out. You'll become resentful. You'll produce activity without fruit.

Spiritual growth: You cannot mature spiritually apart from abiding in Christ. You might accumulate knowledge. You might modify behavior. But transformation—real, deep, lasting change—only comes from life flowing from the vine.

Prayer: You cannot pray effectively if you're not abiding in Christ. Jesus says, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7, NASB). Abiding is the condition for answered prayer.

In every area of Christian life, connection precedes effectiveness. Abiding comes first. Then fruitfulness follows.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne understood this: "It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."

God doesn't need your talents. He needs your connection to Christ. Your abiding in Him. Your likeness to Jesus that comes from drawing life from Him.

Because when you abide—when you remain in Christ, when His life flows through you—you become "an awful weapon in the hand of God." Not through your own strength or abilities, but through the life and power of Christ flowing through you as you remain connected to Him.

Abiding Is the Source of Spiritual Life

Here's the fundamental truth: You have no spiritual life in yourself. None. Zero. All spiritual life flows from Christ.

This isn't just true at conversion. It remains true every moment of every day. You don't graduate from depending on Christ. You don't reach a level of maturity where you can generate spiritual life yourself.

The branch doesn't become the vine. It remains a branch. Forever dependent. Always receiving. Continuously drawing life from the source.

Jesus says: "Apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, NASB).

Not "apart from Me you'll be less effective." *Nothing*. Because you have no spiritual life apart from Him. No ability to produce spiritual fruit. No power to accomplish anything of eternal value.

This is humbling. It strips away all pride, all self-reliance, all confidence in our own abilities.

But it's also liberating. Because it means the pressure is off. You don't have to generate spiritual life through your own effort. You don't have to manufacture fruit through willpower. You don't have to strain and strive and exhaust yourself trying to be spiritually productive.

You just have to abide. Remain connected. Draw life from the vine. And fruit comes naturally.

Paul says it this way: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20, NASB).

"It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." Paul's life was Christ's life flowing through him. His fruitfulness was Christ's fruitfulness produced through him. His effectiveness was Christ's power working in him.

Because Paul abided. He remained connected to the vine. He drew all his life from Christ.

And that's the only source of spiritual life there is. Abiding in Christ. Remaining connected to Him. Drawing everything from Him.

Apart from Christ, We Accomplish Nothing Eternal

You can accomplish impressive things apart from Christ. You can build organizations. You can attract crowds. You can gain influence. You can be productive by human standards.

But eternally? Spiritually? Kingdom purposes? Nothing.

Because only what flows from Christ has eternal value. Only what's done in His power, through His life, for His glory lasts into eternity.

Everything else—no matter how impressive, no matter how well-intentioned, no matter how much human applause it receives—burns up when tested by fire (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

This is why Oswald Chambers could say: "The greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service for Jesus."

You can be so busy serving Jesus that you neglect abiding in Jesus. So consumed with doing things for Him that you have no time to remain in Him. So focused on Christian work that you lose connection with Christ Himself.

And all that work—all that service, all that ministry, all that activity—produces nothing eternal. Because it didn't flow from abiding. It was done in your strength, not His. By your power, not His. For your purposes (even if they seemed spiritual), not His.

Apart from Christ, you can do nothing of eternal value. No matter how impressive. No matter how busy. No matter how religious.

But abiding in Christ—remaining connected to Him, drawing life from Him, allowing His purposes to flow through you—that produces fruit that lasts forever.

The Way Forward: Abiding in Christ Today

So how do we actually do this? How do we abide? How do we remain connected to Christ in practical, daily life?

Make Communion With Christ the Priority

Abiding isn't primarily about doing certain spiritual disciplines. It's about relationship. Connection. Communion with Christ.

This means prioritizing time with Him. Not rushing through prayer to get to your to-do list. Not reading Scripture as a box to check. Not treating quiet time as a preliminary duty before "real life" begins.

Make time with Christ the main event. Everything else flows from that. All your activity, all your service, all your productivity is meant to be the overflow of life you receive in communion with Christ.

Start your day with Him. Not just a quick prayer, but genuine communion. Sit in His presence. Read His word. Listen. Pray. Worship. Remain there until you've actually connected, until you're drawing life from the vine, until you're abiding.

And then carry that connection throughout the day. Keep abiding as you work, as you serve, as you interact with others. Maintain the connection. Draw continually from the vine.

Cultivate Dependence, Not Self-Reliance

Abiding requires recognizing your absolute dependence on Christ. Not partial dependence. Not dependence as a last resort when your own strength fails. *Absolute* dependence. For everything. Always.

This means:

Acknowledge your inability apart from Him. "Apart from Me you can do nothing." Not "you can do a little." *Nothing*. Embrace that truth. Let it drive you to dependence.

Bring everything to Him in prayer. Don't just pray about big decisions. Pray about everything. Invite Christ into every conversation, every task, every decision. Practice His presence continuously.

Trust His strength, not yours. When facing challenges, don't default to self-reliance. Don't mentally catalog your abilities and resources. Turn immediately to Christ. Depend on His strength. Draw from His power.

Confess quickly when you drift. You will drift. You'll shift from abiding to self-reliance without realizing it. When you catch yourself—when you notice you're striving instead of receiving, working instead of abiding—confess it. Return to dependence. Reconnect to the vine.

Prune Ruthlessly

Jesus says: "Every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:2, NASB).

Pruning is painful. It's the cutting away of what seems good—even what seems productive—so that more fruit can come.

God prunes you to remove what hinders fruitfulness. Activities that drain you without producing fruit. Relationships that pull you away from abiding. Commitments that crowd out connection with Christ. Even good things that compete with the best thing.

Submit to the Father's pruning. When He removes things from your life, trust Him. When He cuts away what you thought was essential, believe He's doing it to increase your fruitfulness.

And do your part in pruning. Ruthlessly eliminate what hinders your abiding. Cut out activities that drain your spiritual life without producing kingdom fruit. Remove commitments that leave no time for connection with Christ.

Prune so you can abide more fully. Because abiding produces fruit. And God wants you to bear much fruit.

Let Christ's Words Abide in You

Jesus connects abiding in Him with His words abiding in us:

"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7, NASB).

Abiding isn't mystical disconnection from Scripture. It's saturating yourself in Christ's words until they shape your thinking, guide your decisions, form your character.

Meditate on Scripture. Not just reading for information, but absorbing it, chewing on it, letting it transform you. Let Christ's words dwell in you richly (Colossians 3:16).

Memorize Scripture so His words are always available. Quote them when tempted. Declare them when afraid. Let them guide you when deciding.

Obey what you read. Abiding isn't passive absorption. It's active obedience. Jesus's words abiding in you means you're doing what He says, living how He taught, aligning your life with His truth.

Bear Fruit as Evidence of Abiding

Fruitfulness is the evidence of abiding. Not the goal—the goal is connection with Christ. But the inevitable result.

"My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples" (John 15:8, NASB).

Fruit proves you're abiding. Not perfectly—even healthy branches have seasons. But over time, sustained abiding produces fruit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Lives transformed. Disciples made. The character of Christ formed in you.

If you're not bearing fruit—if your life shows no evidence of Christ's life flowing through you—it's not time for more activity. It's time for more abiding.

Return to the vine. Reconnect. Draw life from Christ. And fruit will come as the natural result of life flowing through you.

The Final First Thing

We've journeyed through Scripture examining what must come first. Seeking the kingdom. Removing the log from our own eye. Being reconciled. Loving God supremely. Loving one another. Repenting. Believing. Losing our lives. Counting the cost. Cleaning the inside. Seeking the lost. Understanding the natural before the spiritual. Building on the rock. Sitting at Jesus's feet.

And now, at the end, we come to the foundation that enables all the others: Abiding in Christ.

Because apart from Him, you can do none of those things. Not sustainably. Not fruitfully. Not in a way that produces eternal results.

You cannot seek the kingdom apart from abiding in the King. You cannot love God or others apart from drawing love from God Himself. You cannot bear spiritual fruit apart from remaining connected to the source of spiritual life.

Abiding isn't one more thing to add to your list. It's the foundation for everything on the list. The source from which all spiritual life and fruitfulness flow.

Jesus said it on the night before His death, and it remains true today: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, NASB).

This is not discouraging. This is liberating.

You don't have to generate spiritual life. You don't have to manufacture fruit. You don't have to accomplish anything through your own strength or wisdom or effort.

You just have to abide. Remain connected. Draw life from Christ. And everything else flows from that.

The branch doesn't strain to produce grapes. It simply remains attached to the vine, and fruit comes naturally. Life flows from the vine through the branch, and the inevitable result is fruitfulness.

That's what Jesus offers you. Not a harder version of religion where you work to produce spiritual results. But connection to Him—the vine, the source of all life—where fruitfulness is the natural result of abiding.

So abide. Remain in Christ. Stay connected. Draw all your life from Him. Depend completely on Him. Trust His strength, not yours.

And watch as He produces through you what you could never produce on your own: much fruit, to the glory of the Father, proving you are His disciple.

Because in the end, the Christian life isn't about what you can do for God. It's about what Christ does through you as you remain in Him.

First abide. Then everything else follows.

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

– John 15:5, NASB

CONCLUSION: The First Things Revolution

When Jesus began His public ministry, His first words were: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17, NASB). When He concluded the Sermon on the Mount, His final illustration was about building on the right foundation. And on the night before His crucifixion, His final teaching to the disciples was about abiding in Him.

From beginning to end, Jesus emphasized first things. The priorities that must precede everything else. The foundations that must be laid before building begins. The order that cannot be reversed without catastrophic consequences.

Throughout this book, we've examined those first things:

Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. Not your comfort, your success, your plans—His kingdom, His priorities, His will. Everything else is added when this comes first.

First remove the log from your own eye. Before you judge others, before you attempt to help others, before you point out others' sins—deal with your own. Self-examination precedes examination of others.

First be reconciled to your brother. Before you worship, before you bring your offering, before you claim to love God—pursue reconciliation with those you've offended. Horizontal relationships cannot be divorced from vertical relationship.

Love the Lord your God first—with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is the great and foremost commandment. Everything else hangs on this. Supreme love for God must be the foundation of your existence.

Love one another as Christ loved you. This is how the world will know you belong to Jesus—not by your correct theology or your spiritual experiences, but by how you love each other.

Repent first. Before you try to grow spiritually, before you attempt to serve God, before you build a religious life—repent. Turn from your sin. Acknowledge your need. Change direction. Repentance is the doorway to everything else.

Believe first. Not after you have all the answers. Not after you've resolved every doubt. Believe that God is and that He rewards those who seek Him. Trust Him before you see. Faith precedes experience.

Lose your life first. Before you can find real life, you must lose the life you're trying to preserve. Death to self precedes resurrection life. Surrender precedes receiving. The grain must fall and die before it produces a harvest.

Count the cost first. Before you commit to following Jesus, understand what it requires. Informed surrender is the only kind that endures. Half-hearted commitment leads to inevitable failure.

First clean the inside. Don't focus on external conformity while your heart remains corrupt. Internal transformation precedes meaningful external change. God judges the heart, not the appearance.

First go to the lost sheep. God's heart beats for those far from Him. Make seeking the lost a priority, not an afterthought. The found are safe; the lost are dying.

First the natural, then the spiritual. You cannot reverse God's established order. Spiritual birth presupposes natural birth. Understanding follows transformation. Spiritual capacity comes through being made spiritually alive.

First build on the rock. Everything depends on the foundation. Build your life on Christ—hearing His words and acting on them—and you'll stand when the storms come. Build on anything else, and you'll fall.

First sit at His feet. Before you serve Jesus, be with Jesus. Before you work for Him, listen to Him. Presence precedes activity. Relationship fuels service. Being comes before doing.

First abide in Him. Connection to Christ is the source of all spiritual life and fruitfulness. Apart from Him, you can do nothing. Abiding in Him, you bear much fruit.

These are the first things. The priorities Jesus established. The foundations He laid. The order He commanded.

And they all point to the same fundamental reality: **God must be first.** Not added to your life. Not incorporated into your plans. *First*. The foundation. The source. The priority that determines all other priorities.

The Cost of Reversed Order

What happens when you reverse these priorities? When you put second things first and first things second?

We've seen it throughout this book:

Seek first your own kingdom, and you end up anxious, empty, chasing shadows. Like the rich fool who stored up earthly treasure while remaining spiritually bankrupt.

Judge others before examining yourself, and you become a hypocrite. A whitewashed tomb. Blind to your own massive failures while obsessing over others' minor ones.

Prioritize performance over reconciliation, and your worship becomes meaningless. God doesn't want your offerings when your relationships are broken.

Love anything more than God, and that thing becomes an idol that enslaves you rather than a gift that enriches you.

Serve others without loving them, and your service becomes empty performance rather than genuine ministry.

Try to grow spiritually without repenting, and you remain dead in your sins, going through religious motions without spiritual transformation.

Demand proof before you believe, and you remain spiritually blind, unable to see what only faith can perceive.

Try to preserve your life, and you lose it. Cling to what you have, and you forfeit what you could receive.

Follow Jesus impulsively without counting the cost, and you start strong but finish poorly, abandoning the path when it becomes difficult.

Focus on external religion while your heart remains corrupt, and you become a Pharisee—impressive on the outside, dead on the inside.

Maintain the church while neglecting the lost, and you miss the Father's heart, become irrelevant to the world, and cease to fulfill your mission.

Try to achieve spiritually what only God can do, and you exhaust yourself in futile striving that produces nothing eternal.

Build your life on anything other than Christ, and when the storm comes—and it will come—your life collapses because the foundation cannot hold.

Serve Jesus without sitting with Him, and you become like Martha—worried, bothered, distracted, missing the one thing necessary.

Try to bear fruit without abiding in Christ, and you produce nothing of eternal value. Apart from Him, you can do nothing.

The order matters. First things must come first. You cannot reverse the sequence without catastrophic results.

The Freedom of Right Order

But here's the beautiful truth: When you get the first things first—when you follow the order Jesus established—everything else falls into place.

Seek first the kingdom, and everything else is added. You stop chasing what you think you need and discover God provides everything you actually need.

Remove your own log first, and you gain the clarity to genuinely help others. You become humble, gentle, effective in restoration.

Reconcile first, and your worship becomes meaningful, your relationships become healthy, your life becomes whole.

Love God first, and all your other loves find their proper place. Nothing becomes an idol. Everything becomes a gift.

Love others as Christ loved, and the world sees Jesus in you. Your love becomes the apologetic that draws people to Him.

Repent first, and you're positioned to receive everything God wants to give you. The doorway opens. Transformation becomes possible.

Believe first, and spiritual reality becomes accessible. You don't need to understand everything; you trust the One who does.

Lose your life first, and you find the abundant life Jesus promised. What you surrender is nothing compared to what you receive.

Count the cost first, then pay it knowing exactly what you're getting into. Informed commitment produces enduring discipleship.

Clean the inside first, and the outside becomes genuinely clean. Internal transformation produces lasting external change.

Go to the lost first, and you align with the Father's heart, fulfill your mission, experience the joy of seeing the lost found.

Be born again first, then everything spiritual becomes accessible. You're given capacity you didn't have before.

Build on the rock first, and when the storm comes—and it will—you stand firm because your foundation holds.

Sit at His feet first, and your service becomes sustainable, joyful, fruitful. Presence fuels activity.

Abide in Christ first, and fruit comes naturally. You don't strain to produce it; you simply remain connected and it flows from the vine through you.

The order Jesus established isn't arbitrary. It's not designed to make life harder. It's the way reality actually works. It's the path to life, freedom, joy, fruitfulness.

The Call to Revolution

This book is a call to revolution. Not political revolution. Not social revolution. Personal revolution. A radical reordering of your priorities according to Jesus's pattern.

The world tells you to put yourself first. Your comfort. Your success. Your happiness. Your plans. Your preferences.

Jesus says put God first. His kingdom. His will. His ways. His glory.

And in that reversal—in that radical reorientation of priorities—you discover the life you were always searching for.

Not easy life. Jesus never promised that. But abundant life. Meaningful life. Fruitful life. Eternal life.

The life that comes from getting the first things first.

So the question is: What are you putting first?

Not what you say is first. Not what you think should be first. What is *actually* first in your life?

Where do you invest the best of your time, your energy, your resources, your attention, your affection?

What determines your decisions? What shapes your priorities? What gets the prime position in your existence?

And is it what Jesus said must come first?

Because if not—if you've reversed the order, if you've put second things first and first things second—nothing else will work. You can try harder, work longer, do more, be busier. But you'll remain frustrated, fruitless, unfulfilled.

Because first things must come first. The order cannot be reversed.

But when you align your priorities with Jesus's priorities—when you put first what He said comes first—everything changes.

Not overnight. Not without cost. Not without difficulty.

But truly. Deeply. Eternally.

The Invitation

Jesus isn't demanding first place in your life to satisfy His ego. He's inviting you to the only life worth living.

He's the vine. You're the branch. Apart from Him, you can do nothing. Abiding in Him, you bear much fruit.

He's the rock. Everything else is sand. Build on Him, and you stand. Build on anything else, and you fall.

He's the bread of life. Everything else leaves you hungry. Feed on Him, and you're satisfied.

He's the way, the truth, and the life. Every other path leads to death. Follow Him, and you find life abundant and eternal.

So put Him first. Not as one priority among many. As *the* priority. The foundation. The source. The Lord.

Seek first His kingdom. Remove first your own log. Be reconciled first. Love Him first with everything you are. Love others as He loved you. Repent first. Believe first. Lose your life first to find it. Count the cost, then pay it. Clean first the inside. Go first to the lost. Understand that first the natural, then the spiritual. Build first on the rock. Sit first at His feet. Abide first in Him.

Make Jesus first. In everything. Always. Completely.

And discover that when you give Him first place—when you surrender everything to Him, when you make Him Lord not just in word but in actual practice—you receive back more than you ever gave up.

You find the life He came to give. The abundant, eternal, joy-filled, fruit-bearing life that comes from getting the first things first.

This is the revolution of first things. The radical reordering of everything according to Jesus's pattern.

It will cost you everything.

It will give you everything worth having.

So put first things first. Starting today. Starting now. Starting with the next decision you make.

Because when you get the first things right, everything else falls into place.

And you discover that Jesus's way—however counterintuitive, however costly, however contrary to human wisdom—is the only way that leads to life.

The abundant, eternal, joy-filled life He promised to all who would seek first His kingdom.

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

– Matthew 6:33, NASB

CONCLUSION: The First Things Revolution

The Pattern of First Things

Throughout this book, we've examined a consistent, unmistakable pattern in Scripture: God establishes an order. A sequence. Priorities that must come first, foundations that must be laid before building can begin, a divine arrangement that cannot be reversed without destroying what we're trying to build.

This isn't arbitrary. God isn't being difficult or demanding when He says certain things must come first. He's revealing how reality actually works. He's showing us the path to life, freedom, and fruitfulness.

Consider what we've learned:

Seek first His kingdom—not as one priority among many, but as the organizing principle of your entire existence. When God's kingdom is first, everything else finds its proper place. When anything else is first, everything becomes disordered.

First remove the log from your own eye—before you attempt to help others, before you judge others, before you point out others' failures. Self-examination precedes examination of others. Humility precedes healing ministry.

First be reconciled to your brother—even before you worship. Even in the middle of bringing your offering to the altar. Horizontal relationships cannot be separated from vertical relationship with God.

Love God first—with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. This isn't one commandment among many; it's the great and foremost commandment upon which everything else depends.

Love one another first—as the identifying mark of discipleship. Not spiritual gifts, not theological precision, not impressive ministry—love. By this all people will know you are His disciples.

Repent first—before you try to grow, before you attempt to serve, before you build a religious life. Repentance is the doorway. Without it, everything else is premature.

Believe first—before you see, before you understand, before you have all the answers. Faith precedes experience. Trust precedes proof.

Lose your life first—if you want to find it. The grain must fall into the earth and die before it bears fruit. Surrender precedes receiving. Death to self precedes resurrection life.

Count the cost first—before you commit, before you build, before you engage in the battle. Informed surrender is the only kind that endures. Half-hearted commitment leads to half-finished towers and devastating defeats.

First clean the inside—before you worry about external appearance. Internal transformation precedes meaningful external change. God judges the heart, and heart change produces behavior change.

First go to the lost sheep—because that's where the Father's heart is. The found are safe; the lost are dying. Priority reflects the Father's priorities.

First the natural, then the spiritual—God's order cannot be reversed. Spiritual birth presupposes natural birth. Spiritual understanding comes through being made spiritually alive.

First build on the rock—because the foundation determines everything. Build on Christ and you stand. Build on anything else and you fall.

First sit at His feet—before you serve, before you work, before you do anything for Jesus. Being with Him precedes doing for Him. Presence fuels service.

First abide in Him—because connection is the source of all spiritual life and fruitfulness. Apart from Him you can do nothing. In Him, you bear much fruit.

Do you see the pattern?

In every case, God establishes what must come first. And in every case, humans are tempted to reverse the order—to put activity before relationship, doing before being, external conformity before internal transformation, self-reliance before God-dependence, comfort before cross, maintaining the found before seeking the lost.

And in every case, reversing the order leads to catastrophe. Not always immediately. Not always visibly. But inevitably, ultimately, eternally.

Because first things must come first. The order cannot be reversed.

Why Getting the Order Right Matters

You might wonder: Why is God so insistent about order? Why does the sequence matter so much? Why can't we just do all these things—love God, serve others, abide in Christ, seek the lost—without worrying about which comes first?

Because the order determines the outcome. The foundation shapes everything built upon it. What comes first influences everything that follows.

Think about it in natural terms:

You cannot harvest before you plant. The order matters. Plant first, then harvest.

You cannot build the roof before the foundation. The order matters. Foundation first, then building.

You cannot be an adult before you're a child. The order matters. Childhood first, then adulthood.

These aren't arbitrary rules. They're the nature of how reality works. The sequence is built into the structure of creation.

The same is true spiritually.

Getting the order right determines sustainability. When you serve Jesus without first sitting at His feet, you burn out. When you work for God without first abiding in Christ, you exhaust yourself producing nothing of eternal value. When you try to help others without first removing the log from your own eye, you do more harm than good.

But when you get the order right—when you sit before you serve, when you abide before you work, when you examine yourself before you judge others—your life becomes sustainable. Service flows from fullness rather than straining from emptiness.

Getting the order right determines fruitfulness. A branch severed from the vine bears no fruit, no matter how hard it tries. A house built on sand falls, regardless of how impressive it looked before the storm. Seed sown among thorns gets choked, even if it initially sprouted with enthusiasm.

But when you get the order right—when you abide in the vine first, when you build on the rock first, when you remove the thorns of worry and wealth first—fruitfulness comes naturally. Not through striving, but as the inevitable result of being properly connected to the source of life.

Getting the order right determines authenticity. When you clean the outside while leaving the inside filthy, you become a hypocrite—a whitewashed tomb, beautiful on the exterior but full of death inside. When you worship God while refusing to reconcile with your brother, your worship is meaningless. When you serve Jesus without knowing Jesus, your service is empty performance.

But when you get the order right—when you clean the inside first, when you reconcile before you worship, when you prioritize relationship over activity—your life becomes authentic. What you are privately matches what you appear to be publicly. Your internal reality aligns with your external expression.

Getting the order right determines eternity. What you build on Christ survives. What you build on anything else burns up when tested by fire. What flows from abiding in Christ has eternal value. What's produced apart from Him—no matter how impressive by human standards—counts for nothing.

The order determines not just the quality of your life now, but the substance of your life forever.

Stephen Covey, though coming from a secular perspective, captured a profound spiritual truth: "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."

What's the main thing? What must be first? In every chapter of this book, we've seen the same answer:

God. His kingdom. His will. His ways. His glory. Relationship with Him. Connection to Christ. Abiding in Him. Being with Him before doing for Him. Knowing Him before serving Him. Loving Him supremely before loving anything else.

God must be first. Not one priority among many. *The* priority. The foundation. The source. The beginning and the end.

And when He's first—when you truly make Him first in practice, not just in theory—everything else finds its proper place.

The Liberation Found in God's Priorities

Here's what seems counterintuitive but is absolutely true: God's priorities don't restrict you. They liberate you.

When you seek first His kingdom, you're freed from the anxiety of trying to secure your own. When you lose your life for His sake, you're freed from the exhausting work of self-preservation. When you abide in Christ, you're freed from the crushing burden of trying to produce spiritual fruit through your own effort.

God's order isn't oppressive. It's liberating.

Think about what happens when you make God first:

You're freed from performance. When you understand that abiding precedes bearing fruit, that sitting at Jesus's feet comes before serving Him, that being with Him matters more than doing for Him—you stop trying to earn His approval through performance. You serve from acceptance, not for acceptance. You work from love, not for love.

You're freed from anxiety. When you truly seek first His kingdom, trusting that everything else will be added, you stop worrying about provision, security, success. Not because you

become irresponsible, but because you recognize that the One who provides the kingdom can certainly provide everything else you need.

You're freed from comparison. When you're secure in God's love—when loving Him is first and being loved by Him is your foundation—you stop comparing yourself to others. You don't need to be better than someone else. You don't need to achieve more than your neighbor. You're running your race, building on your foundation, bearing the fruit that comes from your connection to the vine.

You're freed from false guilt. When you understand that first things must come first, you stop feeling guilty for not doing everything. You can't do everything. You can't be everywhere. You can't meet every need. But you can seek first the kingdom. You can abide in Christ. You can prioritize what God says comes first. And that's enough.

You're freed from burnout. When service flows from presence, when work comes from worship, when doing springs from being—you serve sustainably. Not perfectly. Not without fatigue. But without the soul-crushing burnout that comes from serving Jesus while neglecting to be with Jesus.

You're freed from fruitlessness. When you abide in Christ—when you remain connected to the vine, when you draw all your life from Him—fruit comes naturally. You don't have to strive for it. You don't have to manufacture it. You simply remain connected, and fruit is the inevitable result.

This is the paradox of the gospel: True freedom comes through surrender. Real life comes through death to self. Abundant fruitfulness comes through remaining in Christ rather than striving to produce results.

Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32, NASB). And one of the deepest truths of Scripture is this: God's order, God's priorities, God's insistence on first things—these aren't burdens. They're the path to freedom.

But you only experience that freedom when you actually put first things first. When you stop trying to reverse the order. When you surrender to God's priorities rather than demanding He bless yours.

Living the First Things Life Daily

So how do you actually live this? How do you make "first things first" more than just a good idea? How do you translate these principles into daily practice?

Start Each Day by Surrendering to First Things

Before you check your phone, before you start your to-do list, before you engage with the demands of the day—put first things first.

Begin with God. Sit at Jesus's feet before you serve. Abide in Christ before you attempt to bear fruit. Seek His kingdom before you pursue anything else.

This might mean prayer. It might mean Scripture reading. It might mean worship. It might mean silence before God.

The specific form matters less than the priority: *First God. Then* everything else.

This isn't legalism. It's alignment. It's starting your day with the order right, with priorities properly established, with the foundation secure.

And when you start right, the rest of the day flows differently. You serve from fullness rather than emptiness. You work from connection rather than striving. You face challenges from a place of abiding rather than self-reliance.

Throughout the Day, Keep Checking the Order

It's easy to start well and drift. To begin the day with God first and gradually shift to putting yourself, your work, your concerns, your agenda first.

So throughout the day, keep checking: What's actually first right now? What am I prioritizing in this moment? What's driving this decision?

And when you catch yourself reversing the order—when you notice you're serving without sitting, working without abiding, judging without self-examination, worrying instead of seeking first the kingdom—stop. Repent. Realign. Return to first things.

This is the practice of "first things first" living: Constantly realigning with God's priorities. Repeatedly returning to right order. Continually choosing what must come first.

In Every Decision, Ask: What Comes First?

When facing decisions—big or small—run them through the "first things" filter:

"Am I seeking first God's kingdom, or am I pursuing my own agenda?"

"Am I making this choice from a place of abiding in Christ, or am I relying on my own wisdom?"

"Have I examined my own heart before judging this situation?"

"Am I prioritizing relationship and reconciliation, or am I putting performance and activity first?"

Let the principles of this book shape your decision-making. Not as a rigid checklist, but as a framework for aligning your choices with God's priorities.

Build Rhythms That Reinforce Right Order

You can't sustain "first things first" living through willpower alone. You need rhythms—regular practices and patterns that reinforce right priorities.

This might include:

- **Daily time alone with God** (sitting at Jesus's feet, abiding in Christ)
- **Weekly Sabbath rest** (trusting God's provision, refusing the tyranny of productivity)
- **Regular self-examination** (removing the log from your own eye before judging others)
- **Consistent engagement with Scripture** (building on the rock of Christ's words)
- **Intentional pursuit of the lost** (aligning with the Father's heart)
- **Scheduled margin** (creating space for sitting rather than just serving)

These aren't one more thing to add to your already-full schedule. These *are* your schedule. These are first things. Everything else gets arranged around them, not the other way around.

When You Fail, Return to First Love

Here's the reality: You will reverse the order. You will put second things first. You will drift from God's priorities to your own. You will start serving without sitting, working without abiding, striving without surrendering.

This is the human condition. We're constantly drifting from first things.

But listen to what Jesus says to the church at Ephesus:

"But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first" (Revelation 2:4-5, NASB).

They had left their first love. Not lost it—*left* it. They had walked away. They had put other things first. Good things—work, service, endurance, doctrinal purity—but not the first thing. Not love for Christ Himself.

And Jesus's prescription is simple:

Remember from where you have fallen. Acknowledge that you've reversed the order, that you've left your first love, that you're no longer putting first things first.

Repent. Turn around. Change direction. Return to right priorities.

Do the deeds you did at first. Go back to what you were doing when God was first. When you loved Him supremely. When you sat at His feet before serving. When you abided before striving to bear fruit.

This is the pathway back when you drift. And you will drift. Repeatedly. Regularly.

But you can also return. Repeatedly. Regularly. Every time you catch yourself reversing the order, you can remember, repent, and return to first things.

This isn't failure. This is the Christian life. Daily repenting. Daily returning. Daily realigning with God's priorities.

The Promise of First Place

Paul writes to the Colossians with stunning clarity about God's ultimate purpose:

"He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything" (Colossians 1:18, NASB).

God's purpose: That Christ would have first place in everything.

Not second place. Not sharing first place. *First place.* In everything.

In the church. In your life. In your decisions. In your affections. In your priorities. In your time. In your resources. In your relationships. In your work. In your rest. In your suffering. In your joy.

Everything.

This is what God is working toward. This is what the gospel produces. This is the inevitable result of truly believing and following Jesus—He comes to have first place in everything.

And when He does—when Christ truly has first place in your life—you discover what you've been searching for all along.

Not ease. Not comfort. Not freedom from difficulty.

But life. Real life. Abundant life. The life Jesus came to give.

The life that comes from getting the first things first.

Jim Elliot, the missionary martyred at age 28 while taking the gospel to the Huaorani people of Ecuador, understood this better than most:

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

What can you not keep? Everything. Your possessions, your reputation, your relationships, your achievements, your very life—all temporary. All eventually leaving your hands whether you give them up willingly or not.

What can you not lose? Christ. The kingdom of God. Eternal life. Treasure in heaven. Relationship with God. Fruit that remains forever.

So give what you cannot keep. Lose your life. Surrender your agenda. Release your grip on temporary things. Put God first, even when it costs you everything else.

Because you gain what you cannot lose. The kingdom. Christ Himself. Life eternal. The inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.

That's not foolishness. That's the ultimate wisdom. That's the first things revolution.

The Final First Thing

We end where we began. With Jesus's first word in the greatest sermon ever preached:

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33, NASB).

Seek first. Two words that change everything.

Not seek eventually. Not seek when convenient. Not seek alongside everything else you're pursuing.

Seek first. Before anything else. Above everything else. As the priority that determines all other priorities.

His kingdom. His righteousness. His rule. His reign. His will. His ways. His glory.

And the promise: "All these things will be added to you."

Not maybe. Not if you're lucky. Not if you work hard enough.

Will be. Guaranteed. Certain. Promised by the One who cannot lie.

Because when you seek first His kingdom, everything else finds its proper place. Not necessarily everything you thought you wanted, but everything you actually need. Not always in the timing or manner you expected, but always sufficient. Always good. Always from the hand of a faithful Father who knows what you need before you ask.

This is the revolution of first things. Not adding Jesus to your life while keeping everything else the same. But making Him first—the foundation, the source, the Lord, the treasure, the priority that shapes every other priority.

It will cost you everything.

It will give you everything worth having.

So seek first His kingdom. Remove first the log from your own eye. Be reconciled first. Love God first. Love others as He loved you. Repent first. Believe first. Lose your life first. Count the cost, then pay it. Clean first the inside. Go first to the lost. Build first on the rock. Sit first at His feet. Abide first in Him.

Make Jesus first. In everything. Always. Completely.

Not because He demands it to satisfy His ego. But because He's the only foundation that holds, the only source of life, the only treasure that lasts, the only Lord worth serving, the only love worth living for.

And when you make Him first—when you truly seek first His kingdom with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength—you discover the life you were always meant to live.

The abundant, eternal, joy-filled, fruit-bearing life that comes from getting the first things first.

This is the invitation. This is the call. This is the revolution that changes everything.

Will you answer?

Will you put first things first?

Will you seek first His kingdom?

Everything depends on your answer.

And everything flows from getting the order right.

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

– Matthew 6:33, NASB

"He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything."

– Colossians 1:18, NASB

"But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first."

– Revelation 2:4-5, NASB

APPENDICES

Appendix A: A "First Things" Scripture Index (NASB)

This comprehensive index organizes biblical passages containing "first" language or "first things" principles by theme. References are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB). Use this index for personal study, sermon preparation, small group discussion, or deeper exploration of God's established priorities.

KINGDOM PRIORITY

Seeking God's Kingdom First

- Matthew 6:33 – "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."
- Luke 12:31 – "But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you."
- Matthew 6:19-21 – Treasure in heaven (context for seeking first)
- Matthew 13:44-46 – Kingdom parables (pearl of great price)
- Philippians 3:8 – Counting all things as loss for Christ

God's Supremacy

- Colossians 1:18 – "He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything."
 - Revelation 1:17 – "I am the first and the last"
 - Revelation 22:13 – "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end"
 - Isaiah 44:6 – "I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me"
 - Exodus 20:3 – "You shall have no other gods before Me"
-

LOVE PRIORITY

Love for God

- Matthew 22:37-38 – "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment."
- Mark 12:29-30 – Love God with heart, soul, mind, strength
- Deuteronomy 6:5 – The Shema (original command)
- 1 John 4:19 – "We love, because He first loved us"
- Psalm 27:4 – "One thing I have asked from the Lord"

Love for Others

- John 13:34-35 – "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another"
- Matthew 22:39 – "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"
- 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 – Love is greater than gifts
- 1 John 4:20-21 – Cannot love God while hating brother
- Romans 13:8-10 – Love fulfills the law

First Love

- Revelation 2:4-5 – "You have left your first love"
- Jeremiah 2:2 – "I remember the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothals"

SELF-EXAMINATION AND HUMILITY

Removing Your Own Log First

- Matthew 7:3-5 – "First take the log out of your own eye"
- Luke 6:41-42 – Parallel passage on the speck and log
- Romans 2:1 – You condemn yourself when you judge others
- Galatians 6:1 – Restore gently, looking to yourself

Humility Before Honor

- Proverbs 18:12 – "Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, but humility goes before honor"
- Proverbs 15:33 – "The fear of the Lord is the instruction for wisdom, and before honor comes humility"

- James 4:6-10 – God gives grace to the humble
 - 1 Peter 5:5-6 – Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand
-

RECONCILIATION PRIORITY

Reconcile Before Worship

- Matthew 5:23-24 – "First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering"
- Matthew 5:25 – Make friends quickly with your opponent
- Romans 12:18 – "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men"
- 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 – Ministry of reconciliation

Forgiveness

- Matthew 6:14-15 – Forgive others that Father may forgive you
 - Matthew 18:21-35 – Parable of unforgiving servant
 - Ephesians 4:32 – Forgiving as God in Christ forgave you
 - Colossians 3:13 – Bear with one another and forgive
-

REPENTANCE AND FAITH

Repentance First

- Mark 1:15 – "Repent and believe in the gospel"
- Acts 2:38 – "Repent, and each of you be baptized"
- Acts 3:19 – "Repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away"
- Acts 17:30 – God commands all people everywhere to repent
- 2 Peter 3:9 – God desires all to come to repentance
- Luke 13:3 – "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish"

Faith as Foundation

- Hebrews 11:6 – "Without faith it is impossible to please Him"

- Romans 10:17 – "Faith comes from hearing"
 - Mark 11:22-24 – "Have faith in God"
 - John 20:29 – "Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed"
 - Hebrews 11:1 – Definition of faith
-

DEATH TO SELF

Losing Life to Find It

- Matthew 16:24-26 – "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me"
- Luke 9:23-24 – Take up cross daily
- Mark 8:34-38 – Parallel passage on losing life
- John 12:24-25 – Grain of wheat must die
- Galatians 2:20 – "I have been crucified with Christ"

Dying to Self

- Romans 6:6-11 – Dead to sin, alive to God
 - Colossians 3:3-5 – Your life is hidden with Christ
 - 1 Corinthians 15:31 – "I die daily"
 - 2 Corinthians 4:10-11 – Always carrying about the dying of Jesus
-

COUNTING THE COST

Calculating Before Building

- Luke 14:28-33 – Count the cost before building
- Luke 14:26-27 – Hate father and mother, bear cross
- Matthew 10:37-39 – Love Christ more than family
- Luke 9:57-62 – Cost of discipleship

Forsaking All

- Mark 10:28-30 – Leave everything to follow
 - Philippians 3:7-8 – Counting all as loss for Christ
 - Matthew 19:21 – Sell possessions and follow
-

INTERNAL BEFORE EXTERNAL

Clean the Inside First

- Matthew 23:25-26 – "First clean the inside of the cup"
- Matthew 23:27-28 – Whitewashed tombs
- Luke 11:39-41 – Clean the inside
- 1 Samuel 16:7 – "Man looks at outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart"

Heart Transformation

- Ezekiel 36:26 – "I will give you a new heart"
 - Proverbs 4:23 – "Watch over your heart with all diligence"
 - Matthew 15:18-19 – Evil comes from the heart
 - Jeremiah 17:9-10 – The heart is deceitful
 - Psalm 51:10 – "Create in me a clean heart, O God"
-

SEEKING THE LOST

Priority of the Lost

- Matthew 10:5-6 – "Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"
- Matthew 15:24 – "I was sent only to the lost sheep"
- Luke 19:10 – "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"
- Luke 15:4-7 – Parable of the lost sheep
- Luke 15:8-10 – Parable of the lost coin
- Luke 15:11-32 – Parable of the lost son

Mission Priority

- Matthew 28:19-20 – Great Commission
 - Acts 1:8 – Witnesses to the ends of the earth
 - 2 Corinthians 5:20 – Ambassadors for Christ
-

SPIRITUAL BIRTH AND FOUNDATION

Born Again First

- John 3:3-7 – "You must be born again"
- 1 Peter 1:23 – Born again through the living word
- James 1:18 – Brought forth by the word of truth
- 2 Corinthians 5:17 – New creature in Christ
- Titus 3:5 – Washing of regeneration

Natural Then Spiritual

- 1 Corinthians 15:46 – "However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual"
- 1 Corinthians 15:45-49 – First Adam and last Adam
- Romans 6:4-5 – Newness of life

Building on the Rock

- Matthew 7:24-27 – Build on the rock
 - Luke 6:46-49 – Parallel passage on foundations
 - 1 Corinthians 3:11 – "No man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ"
 - Ephesians 2:20 – Built on foundation of apostles and prophets
 - Isaiah 28:16 – Cornerstone in Zion
-

PRESENCE AND RELATIONSHIP

Sitting at Jesus's Feet

- Luke 10:38-42 – Mary chose the good part; "only one thing is necessary"

- Psalm 27:4 – "One thing I have asked... to dwell in the house of the Lord"
- Psalm 42:1-2 – Soul thirsts for God
- Psalm 84:10 – One day in Your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere

Being Before Doing

- Exodus 3:12 – "You shall worship God at this mountain" (before doing anything else)
- Matthew 11:28-30 – "Come to Me" before work
- Mark 3:14 – Appointed to be with Him
- Acts 4:13 – They had been with Jesus

Abiding in Christ

- John 15:4-5 – "Abide in Me, and I in you... apart from Me you can do nothing"
- John 15:7 – Abiding and prayer
- John 15:9-10 – Abide in His love
- 1 John 2:28 – Abide in Him
- Colossians 2:6-7 – Walk in Him, rooted and built up

WORSHIP PRIORITY

Worship God Alone

- Matthew 4:10 – "You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only"
- Revelation 19:10 – "Worship God"
- John 4:23-24 – Worship in spirit and truth
- Psalm 95:6 – "Come, let us worship and bow down"

First Fruits

- Exodus 23:19 – "You shall bring the choice first fruits of your soil into the house of the Lord"
- Proverbs 3:9 – "Honor the Lord from your wealth and from the first of all your produce"
- Leviticus 23:10 – First fruits offering

- Deuteronomy 26:2 – First fruits to the Lord
-

ORDER IN CREATION AND REDEMPTION

God's Established Order

- Genesis 1:1 – "In the beginning God created"
- John 1:1 – "In the beginning was the Word"
- Colossians 1:15-17 – Firstborn of all creation, preeminent
- Revelation 3:14 – "The Beginning of the creation of God"

Firstborn/Firstfruits

- Exodus 13:2 – "Sanctify to Me every firstborn"
 - Romans 8:29 – "Firstborn among many brethren"
 - 1 Corinthians 15:20 – Christ the firstfruits of those who are asleep
 - 1 Corinthians 15:23 – Order of resurrection
 - Hebrews 12:23 – Church of the firstborn
-

PRAYER PRIORITY

Prayer Before Action

- Matthew 26:41 – "Keep watching and praying"
- Luke 6:12 – Jesus prayed all night before choosing apostles
- Acts 6:4 – "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word"
- Acts 13:2-3 – Prayer and fasting before sending missionaries
- 1 Thessalonians 5:17 – "Pray without ceasing"

Seek God First

- Psalm 5:3 – "In the morning... I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch"
- Psalm 63:1 – "O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly"
- Mark 1:35 – Jesus rose early to pray

- Daniel 6:10 – Daniel prayed three times daily
-

WISDOM AND UNDERSTANDING

Fear of the Lord First

- Proverbs 1:7 – "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge"
- Proverbs 9:10 – "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"
- Psalm 111:10 – "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"
- Job 28:28 – "The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom"

Seeking Wisdom

- Proverbs 4:7 – "The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom"
 - James 1:5 – Ask God for wisdom
 - Proverbs 2:1-6 – Seek wisdom as silver
-

MINISTRY AND SERVICE

Apostles' Priority

- Acts 6:2-4 – "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables"
- 2 Timothy 4:2 – "Preach the word"
- 1 Corinthians 9:16 – "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel"

Service Flowing from Love

- 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 – Gifts without love are nothing
 - Galatians 5:13 – "Through love serve one another"
 - Matthew 20:28 – "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve"
-

CHRONOLOGICAL FIRSTS IN MINISTRY

Jesus's First Actions

- Matthew 3:13-17 – Jesus's baptism (first public act)
- Matthew 4:1-11 – Temptation in wilderness (first test)
- Matthew 4:17 – "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (first preaching)
- John 2:1-11 – First miracle at Cana

First Church Priorities

- Acts 2:42 – "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer"
- Acts 2:46-47 – Daily meeting and worship
- Acts 4:32-35 – Sharing possessions

JUDGMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Judgment Begins with God's House

- 1 Peter 4:17 – "For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God"
- Ezekiel 9:6 – "Begin with My sanctuary"

Accountability Order

- Matthew 18:15-17 – Steps of church discipline
- Galatians 6:1 – Restore the caught in trespass
- James 5:19-20 – Turn back the wandering

PROMISES AND COVENANTS

First Covenant

- Hebrews 8:7 – "For if that first covenant had been faultless"
- Hebrews 8:13 – First covenant made obsolete
- Hebrews 9:1 – Regulations of the first covenant
- Hebrews 9:18 – First covenant inaugurated with blood

New Covenant Priority

- Luke 22:20 – "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant"
 - 2 Corinthians 3:6 – Ministers of new covenant
 - Hebrews 12:24 – Jesus, mediator of new covenant
-

RESTORATION ORDER

Steps of Restoration

- Matthew 18:15 – "Go and show him his fault in private" (first step)
- 2 Corinthians 13:11 – "Be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded"
- Galatians 6:1 – "Restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness"

Returning to First Works

- Revelation 2:5 – "Do the deeds you did at first"
 - Jeremiah 2:2 – Remember the devotion of your youth
 - Hosea 2:7 – "I will return to my first husband"
-

MISC. IMPORTANT "FIRST" PASSAGES

First and Last

- Isaiah 41:4 – "I, the Lord, am the first, and with the last. I am He"
- Isaiah 48:12 – "I am He, I am the first, I am also the last"

First Commandment

- Mark 12:28-31 – "Which commandment is the foremost of all?"
- Exodus 20:1-3 – No other gods before Me

Priority in Persecution

- Luke 21:12 – "Before all these things"
- Acts 26:4-5 – Paul's life from the first

Heaven's Priority

- Matthew 6:20 – "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven"

- Colossians 3:1-2 – "Keep seeking the things above"
 - Philippians 3:20 – "Our citizenship is in heaven"
-

HOW TO USE THIS INDEX

For Personal Study:

- Choose a theme that addresses your current spiritual need
- Read through the passages slowly and prayerfully
- Ask: "What is God saying about priorities in this passage?"
- Journal your insights and commitments

For Small Groups:

- Select a theme for group discussion
- Have members read passages in advance
- Discuss: "How are we doing with this priority as individuals and as a group?"
- Commit to specific actions to align with God's order

For Sermon Preparation:

- Use themes to structure sermon series
- Cross-reference passages to show biblical consistency
- Illustrate with real-life examples of right and wrong priorities

For Discipleship:

- Walk through themes with those you're mentoring
- Discuss practical application in specific life situations
- Follow up regularly on areas of struggle and growth

Note: This index is comprehensive but not exhaustive. As you study Scripture, you will discover additional "first things" principles throughout God's Word. The pattern is consistent: God establishes order, priorities, and sequence that reflect His character and lead to abundant life when followed.

Appendix B: Study Guide Questions

This study guide provides discussion questions, personal reflection exercises, and group study applications for each chapter of *FIRST*. Use these resources for personal growth, small group study, Sunday school classes, or discipleship relationships.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

For Personal Study:

- Work through one chapter per week
- Answer reflection questions honestly in a journal
- Pray through the application steps
- Review your answers regularly to track growth

For Small Groups:

- Read the chapter before meeting
- Discuss 3-5 questions per session (don't try to cover everything)
- Allow silence for people to think before answering
- Keep the focus on application, not just information
- Close with prayer for specific areas of struggle

For Discipleship:

- Use questions to guide one-on-one conversations
 - Focus on personal application and accountability
 - Follow up on commitments made in previous sessions
 - Celebrate growth and address areas of resistance
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INTRODUCTION: The Priority Problem

Discussion Questions:

1. What first comes to mind when you hear the phrase "seek first His kingdom"? Does this sound liberating or restricting to you? Why?

2. The introduction states that "we are constantly getting the order wrong." What does this mean? Can you give examples from your own life?
3. Why do you think humans are so prone to reversing God's priorities? What makes us want to put ourselves first?
4. How does the example of the Rich Young Ruler, Martha, and the disciples illustrate different ways we reverse priorities?
5. Phillips Brooks says the great danger is that we might "fail to perceive life's greatest meaning." What do you think he means? How might this happen to someone who appears outwardly successful?

Personal Reflection:

- What are the top three priorities in your life right now (based on where you actually spend your time, money, and energy—not what you wish they were)?
- How do your actual priorities compare with what Jesus says should come first?
- In what area of your life are you most tempted to reverse God's order?
- What would change in your daily life if you truly put God's kingdom first?

Group Application:

- Share one area where you've experienced the consequences of reversed priorities.
- Discuss: How can we as a group help each other keep first things first?
- Commit to one practical step toward realigning priorities this week.

PART ONE: THE KINGDOM FIRST

Chapter 1: Seeking First the Kingdom

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus says "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). What are "all these things"? What is He promising here?
2. How do the Rich Young Ruler, Martha, and the disciples illustrate different ways we put other things before God's kingdom?

3. What does it actually mean to "seek first" God's kingdom? What would this look like in practical, daily life?
4. Why does anxiety result when we seek first anything other than God's kingdom? (See Matthew 6:25-32)
5. The chapter states: "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24). Why are these mutually exclusive? Can you give examples?

Personal Reflection:

- What are you most anxious about right now? What does your anxiety reveal about what you're seeking first?
- If someone observed your schedule and spending for the past month, what would they conclude about your priorities?
- What would have to change in your life to truly seek first God's kingdom?
- What are you afraid you'll lose if you put God's kingdom first?

Application Exercise:

Daily Kingdom Check: For one week, ask yourself three times daily: "In this moment, am I seeking first God's kingdom or my own?" Record your honest answers. At week's end, identify patterns and areas needing realignment.

Group Application:

- Share one practical way you could seek God's kingdom first this week in your work, family, or personal life.
- Discuss: What "kingdoms" compete with God's kingdom for first place in your life?
- Pray for one another regarding specific anxieties, asking God to help you trust His provision as you seek His kingdom first.

Chapter 2: First Remove the Log

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Jesus use such extreme imagery—a log in one eye trying to remove a speck from another? What point is He making?

2. How did the Pharisees, Simon the Pharisee, and the older brother all demonstrate putting judgment of others before self-examination?
3. Why must self-examination come before examining others? What happens when we reverse this order?
4. The chapter says: "The most dangerous lies are the ones we tell ourselves about ourselves." What are some common lies Christians tell themselves?
5. How does removing the log from your own eye actually help you help others more effectively?

Personal Reflection:

- What "log" might be in your own eye right now that you're not seeing?
- Who are you most tempted to judge? What might that reveal about your own unaddressed issues?
- Ask God: "What am I blind to in my own life that's obvious to others?"
- Where do you most need to practice the prayer: "Search me, O God, and know my heart" (Psalm 139:23-24)?

Application Exercise:

The Mirror Exercise: Before criticizing anyone this week, write down what frustrates you about them. Then ask: "Do I ever do this? How might I exhibit this same sin in different form?" Confess what you discover.

Group Application:

- Share (if comfortable): "One area where I tend to see others' specks while missing my own log is..."
- Discuss: How can we create a culture of humble self-examination rather than critical judgment?
- Practice: Give each person 3 minutes to share one area where they need to "remove the log." Others pray for them specifically.

Chapter 3: First Be Reconciled

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus says leave your offering at the altar and first be reconciled (Matthew 5:23-24). Why does reconciliation take priority over worship?
2. How do Cain, Jonah, and James/John demonstrate putting other things before reconciliation?
3. Why does Jesus say worship is meaningless without reconciliation? What does this teach us about the nature of true worship?
4. C.S. Lewis said: "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." How does remembering what God forgave in you change how you approach reconciliation?
5. What's the difference between reconciliation and enabling? Between forgiveness and immediately restored trust?

Personal Reflection:

- Who has something against you that you haven't addressed?
- What relationship in your life is broken or strained that you've been avoiding dealing with?
- What's keeping you from pursuing reconciliation? Fear? Pride? Hurt? Belief that you're right and they're wrong?
- How might your worship be hindered by unreconciled relationships?

Application Exercise:

The Reconciliation Step: Identify one relationship that needs reconciliation. This week, take the initiative: make the call, send the message, schedule the conversation. Don't wait for them to come to you.

Group Application:

- Share (generally, respecting confidentiality): "I need to pursue reconciliation in this area of my life..."
 - Discuss: What makes reconciliation so difficult? What fears hold us back?
 - Pray for courage to initiate reconciliation, even when it feels risky or uncomfortable.
 - Check in next week: "Did you take the step toward reconciliation?"
-

PART TWO: LOVE FIRST

Chapter 4: The First and Greatest Commandment

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus says loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength is the "great and foremost commandment" (Matthew 22:37-38). Why does this come first? What hangs on getting this right?
2. How did the Rich Fool, the Pharisees, and Demas illustrate putting other loves before love for God?
3. What does it mean to love God with "all" your heart, soul, mind, and strength? What would this look like practically?
4. How do you know if you truly love God most, or if something else has taken His place?
5. The chapter quotes J.I. Packer: "God's chief purpose for creating us is that we might love Him, and in loving Him, find our highest happiness." How does this challenge or confirm your understanding of life's purpose?

Personal Reflection:

- What competes with God for first place in your affections? Money? Relationships? Success? Comfort? Control?
- If God asked you to give up the thing you love most (after Him), could you? Would you?
- How much of your decision-making is driven by love for God versus other motivations?
- What would change in your life if you loved God more than you love anyone or anything else?

Application Exercise:

The Love Audit: For each category below, rate on a scale of 1-10 how much you love God in that area (based on your actual choices, not your intentions):

- Time: Where do you spend it?
- Money: What do you treasure?
- Attention: What occupies your thoughts?

- Energy: What exhausts you because you care so much?
- Affection: What brings you the most joy?

Where are the gaps? What needs to change?

Group Application:

- Share: "The thing that most competes with God for first place in my affections is..."
 - Discuss: How can we tell if we're loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength?
 - Challenge: What would it look like for our group to be marked by supreme love for God rather than just religious activity?
-

Chapter 5: Love One Another First

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus says "by this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). Why is love—not theology, gifts, or ministry—the identifying mark?
2. How did the Priest/Levite, the disciples, and the Corinthian church put other things before loving one another?
3. What's the difference between loving one another and just being nice to people you like? How did Jesus define this love?
4. Why does John say "if someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar" (1 John 4:20)? Why are these inseparable?
5. The chapter quotes C.S. Lewis: "Christian love... is an affair of the will." What does this mean? How is this different from emotional affection?

Personal Reflection:

- Who in your Christian community is hardest for you to love? Why?
- Are there believers you actively avoid, resent, or speak negatively about?
- When was the last time you sacrificially served another Christian in a way that cost you something?

- If the world judged whether you're a Christian based solely on how you love other Christians, what would they conclude?

Application Exercise:

The 1 Corinthians 13 Test: Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 slowly, inserting your name: "[Your name] is patient, [your name] is kind..." Where does the description break down? Confess those areas and ask God to grow His love in you.

Group Application:

- Practice: Have each person share one thing they appreciate about the person on their right. Practice encouraging one another.
- Discuss: How can we create a culture of genuine love rather than superficial niceness in our group?
- Challenge: Identify one person in your church who might be lonely, overlooked, or difficult. How can you love them this week?

PART THREE: REPENTANCE AND FAITH FIRST

Chapter 6: Repent First

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Jesus begin His ministry with "Repent" (Mark 1:15)? Why is this the first word of the gospel?
2. How did Saul/Paul, the Prodigal's brother, and King Saul demonstrate avoiding genuine repentance?
3. What's the difference between remorse and repentance? Between feeling bad and actually turning around?
4. Why is repentance the doorway to everything else? What happens when you try to skip this step?
5. Billy Graham said: "I have to go to God in prayer with tears in my eyes, and say, 'O God, forgive me,' or 'Help me.'" Why is repentance ongoing, not just a one-time event?

Personal Reflection:

- When was the last time you genuinely repented—not just felt bad, but actually turned around and changed direction?
- What sin are you currently making excuses for rather than repenting of?
- Are there areas where you're performing religious activities to compensate for unrepented sin?
- What would genuine repentance look like in your life right now?

Application Exercise:

The No-Excuse Confession: Identify one sin you've been excusing, explaining, or minimizing. Write a confession with no "but," no "because," no shifting of blame. Just: "I sinned. I was wrong. I have no excuse. God, forgive me and change me."

Group Application:

- Share (if comfortable): "An area where I need to move from remorse to repentance is..."
- Discuss: What makes genuine repentance so difficult? What keeps us in excuse-making mode?
- Practice: Create a culture where confession is normal, not shocking. Model vulnerability by sharing your own need for repentance.

Chapter 7: Believe First

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Jesus say "blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (John 20:29)? What makes believing without seeing so important?
2. How did Thomas, Zechariah, and the Israelites at Kadesh Barnea demonstrate putting proof before faith?
3. Hebrews 11:6 says "without faith it is impossible to please Him." Why is faith so foundational? What makes it non-negotiable?
4. What's the difference between blind faith (ignoring reality) and biblical faith (trusting God's character despite circumstances)?

5. Martin Luther said faith is "a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times." How does this challenge or confirm your understanding of faith?

Personal Reflection:

- What area of your life demonstrates genuine faith? Where are you trusting God without seeing the outcome?
- Where are you demanding proof before you'll believe? Certainty before you'll trust? Guarantees before you'll obey?
- What would it look like to take a step of faith in an area where you currently lack certainty?
- Are you waiting to understand everything before you believe anything?

Application Exercise:

The Faith Step: Identify one area where God is calling you to trust Him but you're waiting for more certainty. This week, take one concrete step of obedience/trust before you have all the answers.

Group Application:

- Share: "An area where I'm struggling to believe without seeing is..."
- Discuss: How do we balance legitimate questions with trust? When does seeking understanding become an excuse for not believing?
- Pray for increased faith, especially in areas where circumstances contradict God's promises.

PART FOUR: LOSING TO GAIN

Chapter 8: Lose Your Life First

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus says "whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). How is this paradox actually true?
2. How did the Rich Young Ruler, Lot's wife, and Ananias/Sapphira demonstrate trying to preserve their lives rather than lose them?

3. What does it mean to "deny yourself" and "take up your cross daily" (Luke 9:23)?
What does this look like practically?
4. Why does self-preservation lead to spiritual death? Why is death to self the gateway to resurrection life?
5. C.S. Lewis said: "God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there." How does this explain why losing your life for Christ leads to finding it?

Personal Reflection:

- What are you desperately trying to preserve that God might be calling you to surrender?
- What "life" are you clinging to that you need to lose in order to find real life?
- If dying to self is the pathway to life, what needs to die in you?
- What would it look like to take up your cross daily in your specific circumstances?

Application Exercise:

Daily Death: Each morning this week, pray: "God, I die to myself today. My plans, my preferences, my agenda—I surrender them all. This day belongs to You." Then live accordingly, choosing death to self when moments of decision come.

Group Application:

- Share: "Something I'm trying to preserve that I sense God calling me to surrender is..."
- Discuss: Why is self-preservation such a powerful instinct? What makes losing your life so terrifying?
- Challenge: What would it look like for our group to be marked by people who've lost their lives for Christ's sake?

Chapter 9: Count the Cost First

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Jesus tell people to count the cost before following Him (Luke 14:28-33)? Doesn't this discourage people from becoming disciples?

2. How did the seed among thorns, Demas, and those who turned back demonstrate not counting the cost?
3. What does it mean that "none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33)? Is Jesus being literal here?
4. Bonhoeffer distinguished between "cheap grace" and "costly grace." What's the difference? Why does cheap grace lead to false discipleship?
5. Jim Elliot said: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." How does this capture the wisdom of counting the cost and choosing to pay it?

Personal Reflection:

- Have you honestly counted the cost of following Jesus? What will it require of you?
- What are you unwilling to give up if Jesus asks you to? What does that reveal?
- Are you trying to follow Jesus at a "discount rate"—wanting the benefits without the cost?
- What would change if you truly gave up all your possessions (not necessarily physically, but in terms of ownership and control)?

Application Exercise:

The Cost Inventory: Make two lists:

1. What following Jesus has cost you so far
2. What it might cost you in the future Then make two more lists:
3. What you've gained by following Jesus
4. What you would lose by not following Him

Which costs are you willing to pay? Which aren't you?

Group Application:

- Share: "The cost of discipleship I'm least willing to pay is..."
- Discuss: How do we help each other count the cost honestly without discouraging genuine seekers?
- Challenge: What would full surrender look like for each of us? What's the "all" we're holding back?

PART FIVE: THE ORDER OF RESTORATION

Chapter 10: First Clean the Inside

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus tells the Pharisees to "first clean the inside of the cup" (Matthew 23:26). Why must internal transformation precede external change?
2. How did the Pharisees, Simon the Sorcerer, and the Laodicean church demonstrate prioritizing external religion over internal reality?
3. Why does God judge the heart rather than outward appearance (1 Samuel 16:7)? What does this teach us about what truly matters?
4. Tim Keller said: "The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart." What does this mean? How does this shape how we address sin?
5. Why is external behavior modification without heart change ultimately futile?

Personal Reflection:

- Where is the outside of your "cup" cleaner than the inside? Where do you look more spiritual than you actually are?
- What motivations, thoughts, and desires are you hiding that don't match your external appearance?
- Are you more concerned with how people perceive you or with how God sees your heart?
- What would have to change internally for your external life to truly reflect your internal reality?

Application Exercise:

The Heart Check: Each evening this week, ask yourself:

- What motivated my actions today—love for God or desire for approval?
- What thoughts did I entertain that I wouldn't want others to know about?
- Where did my external behavior not match my internal reality?

Confess what you discover and ask God to clean the inside.

Group Application:

- Share (if comfortable): "An area where my external appearance doesn't match my internal reality is..."
 - Discuss: How can we create a culture of authenticity rather than performance?
 - Challenge: What would it look like to be a group marked by genuine internal transformation rather than just external conformity?
-

Chapter 11: First Go to the Lost Sheep

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Jesus prioritize going to "the lost sheep" (Matthew 10:6; 15:24)? Why not focus on strengthening those already in the fold?
2. How did Jonah, the hired hand, and the focus on the ninety-nine demonstrate putting other things before seeking the lost?
3. Why does Jesus say there's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous who need no repentance (Luke 15:7)?
4. William Booth said: "Put your ear down to the burdened, agonized heart of humanity, and listen to its pitiful wail for help." What does this mean for how we prioritize our time and resources?
5. How do we balance caring for believers and seeking the lost? Is this actually a tension or a false dichotomy?

Personal Reflection:

- How much of your time, energy, and resources go toward reaching the lost versus maintaining the found?
- Do you have any meaningful relationships with people far from God? Why or why not?
- When was the last time you had a spiritual conversation with a non-believer?
- What's keeping you from seeking the lost? Fear? Comfort? Apathy? Busyness with church activities?

Application Exercise:

The Lost Sheep Exercise: Identify three people in your life who are far from God. Pray for them daily by name. Look for one opportunity this week to demonstrate Christ's love to them or engage in spiritual conversation.

Group Application:

- Share: Name one person you know who's far from God and how you can reach out to them.
 - Discuss: What would have to change for our group to prioritize seeking the lost?
 - Challenge: What percentage of our group's time/energy goes to internal programs versus external mission? Should this change?
-

PART SIX: THE FOUNDATION FIRST

Chapter 12: First the Natural, Then the Spiritual

Discussion Questions:

1. Paul says "the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual" (1 Corinthians 15:46). What does this mean? Why can't this order be reversed?
2. How did Nicodemus, the Galatians, and sign-seekers demonstrate trying to reverse this order?
3. Why must you be "born again" (John 3:3-7) before you can understand or experience spiritual things?
4. What's the difference between natural understanding and spiritual understanding? Why can't natural reasoning produce spiritual comprehension?
5. Oswald Chambers said: "You must be born again. Until this crisis comes, all your prayers and fastings and good works and religiousness are of no avail." How does this challenge religious activity without spiritual birth?

Personal Reflection:

- Have you been born again? Can you identify when/how the Holy Spirit made you spiritually alive?
- Are you trying to understand spiritual things through natural reasoning alone?
- Are you attempting to grow spiritually without having been born spiritually?

- What would it mean to depend on the Spirit rather than your natural abilities?

Application Exercise:

The Spiritual Birth Examination:

- Can you articulate your testimony of being born again?
- Is there evidence of spiritual life (fruit of the Spirit, love for God, transformed desires)?
- Are you trying to perfect by the flesh what God began by the Spirit?

If you're uncertain about spiritual birth, talk to a pastor or mature believer this week.

Group Application:

- Share (those comfortable): Your testimony of being born again
- Discuss: How do we help people understand they need spiritual birth, not just behavioral modification?
- Challenge: Are there people in our group who may not be born again but are going through religious motions? How can we lovingly address this?

Chapter 13: First Build on the Rock

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus says the wise builder "hears these words of Mine and acts on them" (Matthew 7:24). Why are both hearing AND acting necessary?
2. How did the foolish builder, those who built without foundation, and those who built on sand demonstrate wrong priorities?
3. Paul says "no man can lay a foundation other than... Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). Why is Christ the only secure foundation?
4. What determines whether your life stands or falls when the storm comes? How is this decided before the storm arrives?
5. Why does the order matter—foundation before building? What happens when you try to reverse this?

Personal Reflection:

- What is your life actually built on? (Not what you say, but what your choices reveal)
- If Christ were removed from your life, how much would actually change?
- Are you hearing Christ's words but not acting on them?
- What "storm" might be coming that will test whether you've built on rock or sand?

Application Exercise:

The Foundation Test: For each area of life below, honestly assess: Is this built on Christ or on something else?

- Career
- Finances
- Relationships
- Identity/Self-worth
- Future plans
- Daily decisions

Where you find sand, what needs to change to build on the rock?

Group Application:

- Share: "An area where I realize I'm not building on Christ as foundation is..."
- Discuss: What are the most common substitute foundations Christians build on?
- Challenge: How can we help each other build on Christ rather than sand?

PART SEVEN: THE PRIORITY OF PRESENCE

Chapter 14: First Sit at His Feet

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus tells Martha "only one thing is necessary" and Mary "has chosen the good part" (Luke 10:41-42). What is the "one thing"? Why does it take priority over service?
2. How did Martha, the disciples in Gethsemane, and the busy religious demonstrate putting activity before presence?

3. Why must being with Jesus precede doing for Jesus? What happens when you reverse this order?
4. Oswald Chambers said: "The greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service for Jesus." How is this possible? How does service compete with devotion?
5. What does it look like practically to "sit at Jesus's feet" in modern life?

Personal Reflection:

- Are you more like Martha (busy serving) or Mary (sitting at Jesus's feet)? How do you know?
- What makes you feel "worried and bothered about so many things"?
- When was the last time you sat at Jesus's feet without an agenda, just to be with Him?
- What would have to change in your schedule to prioritize presence over productivity?

Application Exercise:

The Mary Challenge: This week, spend 30 minutes daily just sitting at Jesus's feet. No agenda, no requests, no rushing through. Just be present with Him through prayer, Scripture, worship, or silence. Notice how this affects the rest of your day.

Group Application:

- Share: "The thing that most often keeps me from sitting at Jesus's feet is..."
- Discuss: How can we create a culture that values presence with Jesus over religious activity?
- Challenge: What would change in our group if we prioritized being with Jesus before doing for Jesus?

Chapter 15: First Abide in Him

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus says "apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). What does "nothing" mean here? Nothing at all, or nothing of spiritual/eternal value?

2. How did Peter's self-reliance, the fruitless branch, and those trusting in works demonstrate trying to produce fruit without abiding?
3. What does it mean to "abide" in Christ? How is this different from occasional connection or periodic prayer?
4. Why does Jesus say the branch "bears much fruit" when it abides, without describing effort or striving? What does this teach about fruitfulness?
5. How does abiding in Christ relate to all the other "first things" in this book?

Personal Reflection:

- Are you truly abiding in Christ, or just visiting Him occasionally?
- What fruit is your life producing? Is it the natural result of abiding or the forced result of striving?
- Where are you trying to bear fruit through your own effort rather than through connection to Christ?
- What would daily abiding look like in your specific life situation?

Application Exercise:

The Abiding Practice: This week, practice "practicing the presence of God." Throughout each day, pause regularly to consciously reconnect with Christ. Talk to Him. Listen for His voice. Acknowledge His presence. Notice how this sustained connection affects your thoughts, attitudes, and actions.

Group Application:

- Share: "An area where I'm trying to bear fruit through effort rather than abiding is..."
- Discuss: What's the difference between striving and abiding? How can you tell which you're doing?
- Challenge: What would it look like for our group to be marked by people who abide in Christ and naturally bear fruit?

CONCLUSION: The First Things Revolution

Discussion Questions:

1. Looking back over the entire book, which "first thing" challenged you most? Which do you struggle with most?
2. The conclusion asks: "What are you putting first?" How would you honestly answer this based on where you actually spend your time, money, and energy?
3. What would have to change in your life to truly put first things first?
4. Jim Elliot said: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." How does this capture the wisdom of the first things revolution?
5. How does Colossians 1:18 ("He Himself will come to have first place in everything") connect to all the chapters we've studied?

Personal Reflection:

- Has this book exposed any area where you've been reversing God's order?
- Which chapter convicted you most? Which encouraged you most?
- What specific changes will you make as a result of reading this book?
- Six months from now, what do you want to be different about your priorities?

Application Exercise:

The First Things Commitment: Write a personal statement of commitment: "By God's grace, I commit to putting first things first by..." Be specific. Share it with someone who will hold you accountable.

Group Application:

- Share: "The one 'first thing' I most need to apply in my life is..."
- Discuss: How can we help each other maintain the 'first things revolution' long-term?
- Commitment: What will our group do differently to ensure we're prioritizing what God says comes first?
- Follow-up: Schedule a check-in meeting 30 days from now to review commitments and progress.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR ONGOING STUDY

Weekly First Things Check: Review these questions weekly to maintain right priorities:

1. Is God first in my affections this week?
2. Have I examined my own heart before judging others?
3. Are my relationships reconciled?
4. Am I abiding in Christ or striving in my own strength?
5. Is my service flowing from presence with Jesus?

Monthly Priority Audit: Once monthly, assess each area:

- Time: Where is it actually going?
- Money: What does my spending reveal about my treasures?
- Energy: What exhausts me because I care so much?
- Relationships: Who am I prioritizing?
- Decision-making: What's driving my choices?

Accountability Questions: Use these in discipleship relationships:

1. What's first in your life right now?
2. Where are you tempted to reverse God's order?
3. What evidence is there that Christ has first place?
4. How is your service flowing from presence?
5. What needs to change to align with God's priorities?

Use these questions not as a burden but as a tool for transformation. The goal isn't perfect answers but honest assessment and ongoing realignment with God's priorities. Grace covers our failures; the Spirit empowers our progress. Keep returning to first things, and watch God transform your life from the foundation up.

Appendix C: The Priority Assessment

This appendix provides practical tools for honestly evaluating your current priorities and realigning them with God's kingdom order. Use these assessments regularly (quarterly or annually) to ensure you're keeping first things first.

HOW TO USE THIS ASSESSMENT

Preparation:

- Set aside 60-90 minutes of uninterrupted time
- Find a quiet place where you can be honest with yourself and God
- Have a journal or notebook ready
- Pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal truth, not just what you want to see
- Commit to honesty over self-justification

Process:

- Work through each section slowly and prayerfully
- Answer based on reality, not aspiration (what you actually do, not what you wish you did)
- Don't rush to fix everything; awareness precedes change
- Share results with a trusted friend or mentor for accountability
- Develop an action plan for the top 2-3 areas needing realignment

Frequency:

- Complete full assessment: Annually
 - Quick check-in (Section I only): Quarterly
 - Review and adjust action plan: Monthly
-

SECTION I: THE TIME & TREASURE AUDIT

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." — Matthew 6:21

The most honest indicator of your priorities is where you actually spend your time and money, not where you wish you spent them or think you should spend them.

PART A: Time Analysis

Instructions: Review your calendar and activities from the past month. Be brutally honest.

Daily Time Breakdown

Estimate hours per day on average for the past 30 days:

Category	Hours/Day Notes
Time with God (prayer, Scripture, worship - alone)	_____
Sleep	_____
Work (including commute)	_____
Family time (intentional, focused)	_____
Entertainment/Media (TV, social media, games, etc.)	_____
Service/Ministry	_____
Relationships (friends, community)	_____
Exercise/Self-care	_____
Other: _____	_____

Total should equal approximately 24 hours

Reflection Questions:

1. **What surprises you about this breakdown?**

2. **What does this reveal about what you truly treasure?**

3. **If someone observed only your calendar, what would they conclude your top priority is?**

4. **How much daily time do you spend with God vs. on entertainment?** God: _____ hours | Entertainment: _____ hours
5. **Is time with God your "first fruits" (beginning of day) or "leftovers" (if there's time left)?** First fruits Leftovers Neither - it doesn't happen consistently

PART B: Financial Analysis

Instructions: Review your bank statements, credit card statements, and giving records from the past 3 months.

Monthly Spending Breakdown

Calculate your average monthly spending in each category:

Category	Amount/Month	% of Income	Notes
Giving (tithes, offerings, generosity)	\$ _____	_____ %	
Housing (rent/mortgage, utilities)	\$ _____	_____ %	
Food (groceries + dining out)	\$ _____	_____ %	
Transportation	\$ _____	_____ %	
Entertainment (subscriptions, hobbies, recreation)	\$ _____	_____ %	
Clothing/Personal	\$ _____	_____ %	
Savings/Investments	\$ _____	_____ %	
Debt payments	\$ _____	_____ %	
Other: _____	\$ _____	_____ %	

Gross Monthly Income: \$ _____

Reflection Questions:

1. **What does your spending reveal about what you value most?**

2. **Are you giving God your "first fruits" or what's left over?** First fruits (give first, before other spending) Leftovers (give if there's money remaining) Neither (inconsistent or no giving)
3. **Do you spend more on your comfort or God's kingdom?** Personal comfort/entertainment: \$_____ Kingdom purposes (giving, ministry): \$_____
4. **If Jesus examined your bank statement, what would He commend? What would He question?**

5. **What financial decision would change if you truly sought first God's kingdom?**

PART C: Energy & Attention Analysis

Instructions: Consider where your mental and emotional energy goes.

What Occupies Your Thoughts?

When your mind wanders, what do you typically think about? Rank these 1-10 (1 = rarely think about, 10 = constantly on my mind):

Topic	Rank (1-10)
God, His Word, spiritual things	_____
Work, career, professional success	_____
Money, financial security	_____
Relationships, what others think of me	_____
Entertainment, hobbies, recreation	_____
Problems, worries, fears	_____
Physical appearance, health, fitness	_____
Future plans, dreams, goals	_____
Other: _____	_____

What Stirs Your Emotions?

What gets you most excited? Most anxious? Most angry? Most energized?

Most excited about: _____

Most anxious about: _____

Most angry about: _____

Most energized by: _____

Reflection Questions:

1. What do your thought patterns reveal about what you treasure?

2. If you're anxious, what does that reveal about what you're seeking first instead of God's kingdom? (See Matthew 6:25-33)

3. What would change about your thought life if you truly treasured God above all?

SECTION II: THE KINGDOM PRIORITY ASSESSMENT

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." — Matthew 6:33

Rate yourself honestly in each area using this scale:

- 1 = Never/Rarely true of me
- 2 = Sometimes true
- 3 = Often true
- 4 = Usually true
- 5 = Consistently true

Seeking God's Kingdom First

Statement	Rating (1-5)
I make decisions by asking "What does God's kingdom require?" before "What do I want?"	_____
When there's conflict between God's will and my preferences, I choose God's will	_____
I view my resources (time, money, abilities) as belonging to God, not me	_____
My daily schedule reflects that God's kingdom is my top priority	_____
I'm more concerned with God's approval than people's approval	_____
When anxious, I return to seeking God's kingdom first and trusting His provision	_____
I evaluate opportunities based on kingdom impact, not personal advancement	_____

TOTAL SCORE: _____ / 35

Interpretation:

- 30-35: Kingdom priority is strong; maintain vigilance
- 20-29: Some alignment but room for growth
- 10-19: Significant misalignment; kingdom not truly first
- Below 10: Major realignment needed

Areas of greatest weakness (lowest scores):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Self-Examination Before Judgment

Statement **Rating (1-5)**

- When I'm frustrated with someone, I first examine my own heart for similar sin _____
- I'm more aware of my own failures than others' faults _____
- I regularly ask God to search my heart and reveal my blind spots _____
- I'm quicker to confess my own sin than to point out others' sin _____
- When correcting others, I do so with humility, aware of my own need for grace _____
- I give others the same grace I need and receive from God _____
- I'm more concerned about my own hypocrisy than others' failures _____

TOTAL SCORE: _____ / 35

One area where I most need to remove the log from my own eye:

Reconciliation Priority

Statement **Rating (1-5)**

- I pursue reconciliation quickly when relationships are broken _____
- I initiate reconciliation even when I believe the other person is more wrong _____
- I don't let worship or service substitute for unreconciled relationships _____
- I'm willing to be vulnerable and admit fault to restore relationships _____
- There are no people I'm actively avoiding due to unresolved conflict _____
- I forgive as quickly as God forgives me _____
- I value relational peace more than being right _____

TOTAL SCORE: _____ / 35

Relationships currently needing reconciliation:

1. _____

2. _____

Love for God

Statement	Rating (1-5)
I love God more than any person or possession	_____
My love for God is demonstrated in daily obedience, not just words	_____
I love spending time with God, not just serving Him	_____
When I must choose between God and something else I love, I choose God	_____
My heart's greatest desire is knowing God, not using God	_____
I love God with my mind (thinking about Him) throughout the day	_____
Evidence of my love for God would be obvious to an outside observer	_____

TOTAL SCORE: _____ / 35

What competes most with God for first place in my affections:

Love for Others

Statement	Rating (1-5)
I sacrificially serve other Christians, not just those I naturally like	_____
My love for fellow believers is recognizable to outsiders (John 13:35)	_____
I'm patient, kind, not easily angered with other Christians (1 Cor 13)	_____
I prioritize unity and peace over being right or getting my way	_____
I regularly encourage, support, and bear the burdens of others	_____
I genuinely want good for people who have hurt or wronged me	_____

Statement**Rating (1-5)**

My love for others costs me something (time, money, comfort)

TOTAL SCORE: _____ / 35**People I find hardest to love (and need to love better):**

Repentance & Faith**Statement****Rating (1-5)**

I regularly confess specific sins without excuses or blame-shifting

When I sin, I genuinely turn from it, not just feel bad about it

I treat repentance as a lifestyle, not a one-time event

I trust God's promises even when circumstances contradict them

I take steps of obedience before I have all the answers

I believe God rewards those who earnestly seek Him (Hebrews 11:6)

My faith is demonstrated in my actions, not just my words

TOTAL SCORE: _____ / 35**Area where I most need to move from remorse to genuine repentance:**

Death to Self**Statement****Rating (1-5)**

I daily deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Jesus

I'm willing to lose what I treasure if God asks me to

I'm more concerned with God's glory than my comfort

Statement

Rating (1-5)

I've surrendered control of my life to Christ _____

I'm not clinging to my reputation, success, or achievements _____

I regularly choose what God wants over what I want _____

My life demonstrates I'm losing my life to find it _____

TOTAL SCORE: _____ / 35

What I'm most desperately clinging to that I need to surrender:

Presence Over Activity

Statement

Rating (1-5)

I prioritize being with Jesus over doing things for Jesus _____

I regularly sit at Jesus's feet (prayer, Scripture, worship) before serving _____

My service flows from intimacy with Christ, not obligation _____

I'm not "worried and bothered about many things" (Luke 10:41) _____

I protect time alone with God from other demands _____

I'm more satisfied by time with Jesus than by productivity _____

My spiritual life is characterized by abiding, not striving _____

TOTAL SCORE: _____ / 35

How often I'm like Martha (distracted by service) vs. Mary (sitting at Jesus's feet):

Mostly Martha Often Martha Balance Often Mary Mostly Mary

Abiding in Christ

Statement	Rating (1-5)
I maintain continuous connection with Christ throughout each day	_____
My fruitfulness comes from abiding, not from striving	_____
I depend on Christ's strength rather than my own abilities	_____
I'm consciously aware that apart from Christ I can do nothing (John 15:5)	_____
Prayer is ongoing conversation, not just scheduled events	_____
I draw my identity, worth, and purpose from being in Christ	_____
My life demonstrates I'm a branch abiding in the vine	_____

TOTAL SCORE: _____ / 35

Evidence that I'm abiding vs. evidence that I'm striving:

Abiding: _____

Striving: _____

SECTION III: OVERALL PRIORITY SNAPSHOT

Summary Scores

Transfer your total scores from Section II:

Priority Area	Score (/35) Status
Seeking God's Kingdom First	_____
Self-Examination Before Judgment	_____
Reconciliation Priority	_____
Love for God	_____
Love for Others	_____
Repentance & Faith	_____

Priority Area **Score (/35) Status**

Death to Self _____

Presence Over Activity _____

Abiding in Christ _____

GRAND TOTAL: _____ / 315

Overall Interpretation:

- 270-315: Strong alignment with kingdom priorities; stay vigilant
- 225-269: Good foundation with room for growth
- 180-224: Moderate alignment; significant areas need attention
- 135-179: Substantial misalignment; major realignment needed
- Below 135: Crisis level; immediate radical reorientation required

The Three Most Urgent Areas

Based on your scores and reflection, identify your three weakest areas:

1. _____ **Current reality:**
_____ **What needs to change:**

2. _____ **Current reality:**
_____ **What needs to change:**

3. _____ **Current reality:**
_____ **What needs to change:**

SECTION IV: DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

These questions help identify specific areas of misalignment that scores might not reveal.

The "What If" Questions

Answer honestly:

1. **If God asked you to give up the thing you love most (after Him), could you? Would you?** The thing I'd be most reluctant to surrender: _____
 I would surrender it I would struggle but surrender I would not surrender it
 2. **If God called you to a ministry/location/sacrifice that would cost you your reputation, comfort, or security, would you obey?** Yes, immediately Eventually, after processing Probably not Definitely not
 3. **If all Christian activity and community were removed from your life, would you still passionately pursue God?** Yes Probably Maybe No
 4. **If your life ended today, what would you most regret not having prioritized?**
-

5. **If Jesus physically appeared and reviewed your calendar and bank statement, what would He commend? What would He challenge?** Commend: _____ Challenge: _____

The "Who Knows" Questions

1. **If those closest to you were asked "What matters most to [your name]?", what would they say?**

2. **If your coworkers were asked "What drives [your name]'s decisions?", what would they say?**

3. **If your children (or those who observe your life) were asked "Who/what does [your name] love most?", what would they say?**

4. **Do the people who know you best see evidence that Christ has first place in your life?** Clearly yes Probably Maybe Probably not Clearly no

The "Last Time" Questions

1. **When was the last time you:**
 - Said "no" to something you wanted in order to obey God? _____
 - Sacrificed financially for kingdom purposes? _____

- Spent extended time (60+ min) alone with God? _____
- Initiated reconciliation with someone? _____
- Genuinely repented and changed direction? _____
- Shared the gospel with someone far from God? _____
- Made a decision based solely on what God wanted, not what you wanted?

2. What do these "last times" reveal about your priorities?

SECTION V: REALIGNMENT ACTION PLAN

"Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first." — Revelation 2:5

Based on your assessment, create a concrete plan for realigning your life with God's priorities.

Step 1: Acknowledge Reality

Complete this statement honestly:

"I have been putting _____ before God. This is evidenced by _____ . I confess this is sin, and I need God's help to change."

Step 2: Identify Root Issues

Why have you reversed God's priorities in this area?

- Fear (of loss, failure, rejection, etc.)
- Idolatry (this thing has become my functional god)
- Pride (I think I know better than God)
- Unbelief (I don't really trust God's way works)
- Comfort (God's way requires too much of me)
- Ignorance (I didn't realize I was reversing the order)
- Other: _____

What lies am I believing that fuel this misalignment?

What truth from God's Word counters these lies?

Step 3: Repent Specifically

Write a prayer of repentance. Be specific. No excuses. No blame-shifting.

Dear God,

Step 4: Commit to Concrete Changes

For each of your top 3 priority weaknesses, identify specific, measurable actions.

Priority Area #1: _____

Concrete changes I will make:

DAILY: _____

WEEKLY: _____

MONTHLY: _____

IMMEDIATE (within 7 days): _____

Priority Area #2: _____

Concrete changes I will make:

DAILY: _____

WEEKLY: _____

MONTHLY: _____

IMMEDIATE (within 7 days): _____

Priority Area #3: _____

Concrete changes I will make:

DAILY: _____

WEEKLY: _____

MONTHLY: _____

IMMEDIATE (within 7 days): _____

Step 5: Remove Obstacles

What needs to be removed from my life to make room for these priorities?

STOP doing: _____

REDUCE significantly: _____

DELEGATE to others: _____

ELIMINATE from schedule: _____

Step 6: Build New Rhythms

What new patterns will reinforce right priorities?

Morning routine that puts God first:

Weekly rhythm that prioritizes kingdom:

Monthly practice for ongoing assessment:

Annual commitment for deep evaluation:

SECTION VI: ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK

"Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed." — James 5:16

Lasting change requires accountability. Use this framework to involve others in your realignment.

Identifying Your Accountability Partner(s)

Who will hold you accountable?

Name: _____

Relationship: _____

Why this person: _____

When will you meet?

Frequency: Weekly Bi-weekly Monthly

Day/Time: _____

Format: In-person Phone Video Combination

The Accountability Contract

Share this with your accountability partner. Have them ask you these questions regularly.

Questions They Should Ask You:

1. FOUNDATIONAL (Every meeting):

- What is currently first in your life? (Based on evidence, not aspiration)
- Where are you tempted to reverse God's order this week?
- What evidence is there that Christ has first place in your life?

2. SPECIFIC TO YOUR TOP 3 WEAKNESSES:

Priority Area #1: _____

Ask me: _____

Priority Area #2: _____

Ask me: _____

Priority Area #3: _____

Ask me: _____

3. CONFESSION & PRAYER:

- Where did you fail this week in keeping first things first?
- Where did you succeed? (Celebrate this!)
- What do you need prayer for in the coming week?

Your Commitment to Your Accountability Partner:

I commit to: Being completely honest, not just giving "acceptable" answers Not making excuses or justifying failures Being specific about both failures and victories Accepting confrontation when I'm out of alignment Initiating contact if I'm struggling before our scheduled meeting Praying for my accountability partner as they hold me accountable

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Their Commitment to You:

Ask your accountability partner to commit to: Asking the hard questions, not just accepting surface answers Speaking truth in love, even when it's uncomfortable Praying for you regularly Celebrating victories, not just addressing failures Maintaining confidentiality Pointing you to grace and Christ, not just behavior modification

Their Signature: _____ Date: _____

Group Accountability

If you're doing this in a small group context:

Group Commitment:

We commit as a group to:

- Share honestly about our priority weaknesses
- Ask each other the hard questions
- Pray specifically for each other's realignment
- Celebrate progress and extend grace for failures
- Check in at every meeting: "How are you doing with first things?"

Group members participating:

1. _____ Commitment area: _____
2. _____ Commitment area: _____
3. _____ Commitment area: _____
4. _____ Commitment area: _____
5. _____ Commitment area: _____

SECTION VII: PROGRESS TRACKING

Use this section to track your realignment over time. Review monthly.

Monthly Check-In

Month: _____ **Year:** _____

Priority Area #1: _____

Commitments made: _____

Progress this month:

Significant improvement Some improvement No change Worse

Evidence of change: _____

Obstacles encountered: _____

Adjustments needed: _____

Priority Area #2: _____

Commitments made: _____

Progress this month:

Significant improvement Some improvement No change Worse

Evidence of change: _____

Obstacles encountered: _____

Adjustments needed: _____

Priority Area #3: _____

Commitments made: _____

Progress this month:

Significant improvement Some improvement No change Worse

Evidence of change: _____

Obstacles encountered: _____

Adjustments needed: _____

Overall Assessment This Month:

Where I saw God working: _____

Biggest victory: _____

Biggest struggle: _____

What I learned about myself: _____

What I learned about God: _____

Focus for next month: _____

Quarterly Review

Quarter: _____ **Year:** _____

Complete another full assessment (Section II) and compare to baseline:

Priority Area	Initial Score	Current Score	Change
Kingdom First	_____	_____	_____
Self-Examination	_____	_____	_____
Reconciliation	_____	_____	_____
Love for God	_____	_____	_____
Love for Others	_____	_____	_____
Repentance & Faith	_____	_____	_____
Death to Self	_____	_____	_____
Presence Over Activity	_____	_____	_____
Abiding in Christ	_____	_____	_____
TOTAL	_____	_____	_____

Reflection:

Greatest growth: _____

Persistent struggle: _____

Surprises (positive or negative): _____

New priorities for next quarter: _____

Do I need to adjust my accountability structure? Yes No

If yes, how: _____

Annual Review

Year: _____

Complete the full assessment again and reflect on the year:

1. How has putting first things first changed my life this year?

2. What has been most difficult about maintaining right priorities?

3. What has been most freeing about keeping first things first?

4. How have I seen God work through my obedience to His order?

5. Where do I still struggle most with reversing God's priorities?

6. What's my focus for the coming year in terms of priorities?

7. How will I continue to keep first things first?

SECTION VIII: WARNING SIGNS OF DRIFT

Even after realignment, you will be tempted to drift back to reversed priorities. Watch for these warning signs:

Red Flags Checklist

Check any that are currently true:

I'm too busy to spend unhurried time with God I'm more anxious than peaceful I'm more irritable with people, especially those closest to me I'm more critical of others and defensive about myself My quiet time feels like a duty rather than a delight I'm making decisions based on what's best for me, not what's best for God's kingdom I'm avoiding someone I need to reconcile with I'm more concerned with my reputation than God's glory I'm exhausted from doing things for God rather than energized from being with God I can't remember the last time I genuinely repented I'm relying on my own strength rather than abiding in Christ Service feels burdensome rather than joyful I'm more worried about financial security than trusting God's provision I haven't shared the gospel or served the lost in months I'm comparing myself to others rather than measuring my life by Christ

Number of boxes checked: _____

Interpretation:

- 0-2: Healthy vigilance; stay watchful
- 3-5: Warning signs; address before it worsens
- 6-9: Significant drift; urgent realignment needed
- 10+: Crisis level; stop and realign immediately

If you checked 3 or more boxes:

1. Stop. Don't just keep pushing through.
2. Confess to God: "I've drifted from first things."
3. Identify which "first thing" you've abandoned
4. Return to your Action Plan (Section V)
5. Contact your accountability partner TODAY
6. Make one immediate change to realign

SECTION IX: ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE JOURNEY

Remember These Truths:

1. This is about grace, not performance. You're not trying to earn God's love by getting priorities right. You already have His love through Christ. Right priorities are the *response* to His grace, not the path to His grace.

2. Perfection isn't the goal; direction is. You will fail. You will reverse priorities. You will drift. But God's grace is sufficient. What matters is: Are you moving toward right priorities? Are you returning when you drift? Are you growing over time?

3. The Spirit empowers what God commands. You cannot maintain right priorities through willpower alone. The same Spirit who convicted you to realign will empower you to persevere. Depend on Him.

4. Community is essential. You cannot do this alone. You need others to encourage you, confront you, pray for you, and celebrate with you. Stay connected.

5. The destination is worth the journey. Keeping first things first isn't easy. It requires daily death to self. But the life it produces—the abundant, fruitful, joyful life Jesus promised—is worth every sacrifice.

Key Scriptures for Perseverance:

- **Philippians 1:6** — "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."
- **Philippians 2:13** — "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."
- **Colossians 1:29** — "For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me."
- **Hebrews 12:1-2** — "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith."

Final Prayer

Pray this prayer as often as needed:

"Father, You have shown me through Your Word what must come first. I confess I have reversed Your priorities, putting myself and my preferences before Your kingdom and Your glory. Forgive me.

I cannot maintain right priorities through my own strength. I need Your Spirit to empower me, Your grace to sustain me, Your wisdom to guide me. Help me keep first things first—not perfectly, but persistently. Not to earn Your love, but as a response to the love You've already given me in Christ.

Give me the courage to realign my life with Your priorities. The discipline to maintain what You establish. The humility to confess when I drift. And the faith to trust that Your way is always best.

May Christ have first place in everything in my life. For Your glory and my joy.

In Jesus's name, Amen."

Assessment Completed: _____

Next Review Date: _____

Accountability Partner Notified: Yes No

Action Plan Started: Yes No

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." — Matthew 6:33