

Seeking the Kingdom of God First

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of seeking the kingdom of God first, prioritizing our relationship with God and seeking to know His will and do it, with the promise of God's provision for our earthly needs.

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Luke 9:60, Philippians 3:20, Colossians 3:1

Topics: "Spiritual Commitment", "Prioritizing God's Kingdom"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the necessity of prioritizing the Kingdom of God and His righteousness above all else, clarifying that this kingdom is spiritual and resides within the hearts of believers rather than being a worldly establishment. He urges that seeking this kingdom should be the foremost concern of our lives, requiring earnestness, perseverance, and a complete commitment to Christ's governance. Finney warns against the distractions of worldly cares and stresses that neglecting this command can lead to spiritual peril, while also assuring that God will provide for our earthly needs if we prioritize Him. The sermon highlights the importance of treating spiritual matters with urgency and sincerity, as the eternal well-being of our souls depends on it.

Transcript

"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." --Matthew 6:33.

The Jews were greatly mistaken in respect to the nature of that kingdom which their Messiah was to set up. They expected a kingdom like the kingdoms of this world, invested with earthly splendor, fitted to aggrandize their nation, and minister to their national pride. Christ sought to undeceive them. He told them that his kingdom did not come with outward show--that it must be within men, and that it was not of this world. He would have them understand that it was spiritual, and not temporal; demanding the homage of the heart, and not the pomp and pageant, so commonly rendered to royalty. The simple idea of this kingdom is that Christ himself reigns in the hearts of his people, securing the perfect submission of the will, and the consecration of every power to himself. Thus his kingdom is within; it is invisible. It puts on no outward glare. In the hearts of men he writes his laws by his Spirit, and thus rules over them to deliver them from Satan and sin, and translate them into his own kingdom of peace and love.

The subjects of this Kingdom are shut up to no particular location. Each in the sphere where providence has called him to reside and to his master's will, may there be truly a member of this invisible kingdom. Christ may be reigning over him, and he may be indeed a subject and a citizen of this kingdom of God.

This is the kingdom we are required in our text to seek. To seek it, implies that we seek to belong to it--seek to know Christ's will and to do it--seek to be recognized by Christ as one of his subjects, and seek to promote the interests of this kingdom, as all true subjects of any kingdom do, and should do if the government deserves their support. He who truly seeks first the kingdom of God, seeks to be as really and perfectly governed by Christ now, as the holy in Heaven are. He would have Christ living and reigning within him so that every thought shall be brought into obedience.

We are required, not only to seek the kingdom of God, but also "his righteousness." The original word here rendered righteousness, is sometimes rendered justification. The radical idea seems to be simply this--being right with God--coming into a state of acceptance with him. This we know must in our case include both the free pardon of past sin and the being sanctified so that we are not actually sinning. So long as his law condemns us for unpardoned sin, or so long as we are actually sinning, it would be monstrous to suppose that God can accept us as righteous, and that we are right in his sight.

Hence, when the righteousness of God as in our text, is spoken of as a thing for us to seek, it must include both pardon and sanctification.

The command to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness first, enjoins upon us to treat this subject as of absolute and supreme importance. This must be the great business of our lives. Nothing else is allowed to have any practical importance compared with this.

The injunction--seek God's kingdom first, implies that we seek it first in point of time. It should be the first thing attended to. It is not merely to be admitted as of first importance, but should really be put first in point of time. The first thoughts of each morning should be given to it. And whenever God's word, or his providence brings before our mind the invitations or the claims of this kingdom, we are to remember that now is the accepted time. Now, first in order, before any thing else, let the concerns of your soul with the kingdom of God and his righteousness have the first regard.

It is also implied that we seek this kingdom with supreme earnestness. This is fully involved in the points just spoken of. We are required to agonize to enter in at the strait gate--to press hard for entrance, with the greatest earnestness, and the most strenuous efforts. Let the soul be indeed in agony to carry the point and make sure of admission into the kingdom of God. To the same purport are very many passages which I might quote from the Scriptures, all going to show that God requires us to seek with all our hearts, to lay out the utmost strength of our souls, if we would successfully resist the devil, and really break the chains of sin, and secure so great a treasure as eternal life.

It is also implied that we seek the kingdom of God with perseverance. We must press on till we obtain. This is the great business of life--to get back from revolt, to obedience--from our state of rejection, cast out from God, to a state of acceptance, where we shall be sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty. Then let us persevere in seeking the whole of this change until it be completely effected. The nature of the case demands such perseverance. The blessings within reach are too great and precious to be lost for want of perseverance in the pursuit. They will amply reward you for a whole life of most earnest seeking.

Again, the kingdom of God would be the object of supreme engrossment. You must bring all your powers into action. Your intellect must be thoroughly awake--your sensibility to the claims of truth must be all alive, and your will must act with inflexible decision. Absolutely your whole mind must be aroused to its utmost exertion.

Still again, the command implies that every thing else must be postponed to this. The spirit of the precept demands that every thing else be thrown into the back-ground, and this be placed foremost of all.

When Christ was upon earth, he admitted no apology for delay--would allow nothing to interpose between the soul, and its present duty. On a certain occasion, Christ called a man to follow himself. The man replied, "Suffer me first to go and bury my father." No, said Christ, "leave the dead to bury their dead"--the dead in sin to bury the natural dead--"but go thou and preach the kingdom of God." One might suppose that if any circumstances would justify delay, these would. God has said, "Honor thy father;" and the instinctive feelings of propriety, as well as respect for the dead are wont to secure a prompt regard to these last offices which we can pay to the departed. Shall we then forsake a father's burial, and leave to others, yea to wicked men, these last obsequies? Yea, let the dead bury their dead; thou hast a call from God--go thou and preach his kingdom.

But "let me go first and bid them farewell which are at home in my house." No; said Christ, ["no man putting his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Now it is plain that our Savior puts these strong cases for the very purpose of enforcing strongly this point--that nothing else whatever may be placed before prompt obedience to this great precept, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

The spirit of the text requires that every thing shall be promptly sacrificed that comes in competition with this. Let nothing else come up to crowd this aside; seek this first; make this your present business; if your father is dead, no matter, attend to this; cut off your right hand if it interfere with this work--make any sacrifice whatever which needs to be made in order to your successful prosecution of this great work of seeking first the kingdom of God. No consideration whatever may be allowed to divert the mind from this subject.

To this command Christ has annexed a promise. This next claims our attention.

You will observe that the condition of this promise is, "Seek first the kingdom of God;"--as if he had said "If you will seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, you shall have all these earthly things of which he had been speaking. You shall be fed as surely as I feed the ravens, and clothed as well as I clothe the lilies. You need not be anxious for these things. It is my business to provide them. Mark the lilies of the field; how they grow--they toil not--they spin not; yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. And if God so gloriously attires the grass which grows only for a day, and is burnt tomorrow, will he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" ["Therefore, be not anxious about these earthly things. Let the Gentiles who know not their Father on high, seek after these things anxiously--but remember that your Father knows your wants and will take care to supply them. Only, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

Consider also that your anxieties about these things can do no good. Which of you by ever so much anxiety can add to his stature one cubit?

We are to understand this promise as including all that is necessary for us, either in time or eternity. The connection however, shows that Christ had principal reference to provisions for our earthly wants. He knows what these wants are. He formed the constitution which creates them; and he passed through this very state of physical want himself. He understood how strong the tendencies of our minds are to excessive anxiety about the requisite supply. Hence he says--I will take away from you all apology for

neglecting the things of My kingdom--you shall have no excuse for not making religion the chief thing; let it be your first business--first in point of time--first in your esteem--first in the earnestness with which you seek it; then trust me to make up all the other things that you need. Do My business and I will do yours. Take care of My kingdom--throw your whole soul into its interests, and I will supply your physical wants. Do your duty as I enjoin it, and I will be responsible for these lesser things.

It is very easy to see that for Christ to take this course, and require us to seek the kingdom of God first is very reasonable, even though he had annexed no promise; because,

1. It is of supreme importance to us that we should attend to these spiritual things. The infinite well-being of the soul depends upon it.
2. The time is so short: and the fact that we know not how short it is, renders it indispensable that we should attend to it immediately. Life is so uncertain that we can place no dependence upon the prospect of doing another day what we put over from this. "Who knoweth what a day may bring forth?"
3. Another consideration: Every hour's delay makes success more doubtful, and your peril of damnation more portentous. Your heart will be more hardened, temptations will have gained more power, and a mightier struggle will be demanded ere victory can be sure.
4. If you neglect but for one moment too long, it will be fatal. There is a moment beyond which if you neglect seeking the kingdom of God, you can never attend to it with success thereafter. If you wait beyond that point, no mercy remains; the door of heaven is shut against you; your damnation is certain.

We cannot know where this point is. It may be this hour, this moment. This sinner, may be your last opportunity. If so, how important that Christ should require you to seek salvation now! And how vital that you should heed and obey the call!

5. Unless the subject is treated as of supreme importance, it is of no use to attend to it at all. Some persons attend to it just enough to make their damnation as certain as it can possibly be made, and as dreadful. Let one attend just enough to quiet his conscience and lull his fears--just enough to keep the truth before his mind and learn to resist it--just enough to habituate himself to resist the claims of God and do despite to the Spirit of grace; he is in the worst condition possible. He is commonly decent enough to prevent being aroused and alarmed by his own open wickedness. He does nothing that shocks his own moral sense and startles him from his deep lethargy; so he moves along waxing daily worse and worse, till he wakes at last in hell.

Now it were better for this man to let the subject entirely alone than to attend to it in this sleepy, profitless, heart-hardening way. It is better also for the sake of others that he should let the subject alone than give it only such attention; for he will greatly stumble others and lead them down to perdition. His example induces others to follow him; and if his course is the most ruinous that can be for himself, so will it be for his followers. But it was in view of this very influence that Christ said of some, "I would that thou wert cold or hot; because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth." Christ therefore prefers that you would let the subject entirely alone, rather than attend to it just enough to quiet your fears, evade conviction, harden your heart, induce others to ruin, and never do your duty.

6. The supreme importance of the subject would render Christ's command in the text more reasonable even without the annexed promise. For even if we were to suffer the want of bread and the worst

pinchings of poverty, this were infinitely better than to lose the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Therefore, it must be wise to seek the kingdom of God first.

It would be supreme folly to grasp the lesser good so eagerly as to lose that which is infinitely greater. How much more now, since to him who seeks first God's kingdom, the promise is given--all these things shall be added unto thee. Indeed we have no reason left us for neglecting obedience to this great and good command.

My main object in this discourse is to bring before you, and illustrate several

REMARKS.

1. The command and promise in our text strongly illustrate God's great care for our souls. If God had no care for us, or but little care for us, he would not use so much effort to urge us to secure salvation. Why is it that God reiterates these commands so incessantly, giving line upon line, and precept upon precept? Only because he would awaken and urge us to those efforts which our case demands. But especially I ask, Why does God append to his commands to great and precious promises? He knows our circumstances. He sees how great our wants are, and how many, and therefore he says--your soul is in danger and will be lost if you suffer your chief attention to be engrossed in cares for earthly things. I entreat you, therefore, to take care of your soul, and I will see to your physical wants. Do you by all means seek first my kingdom and righteousness, and I will see that your "bread shall be given and your water shall be sure."

This is just like an infinite Father. It is as if a father should come out from the East to visit his son in Ohio, and should find him almost worn down with toil, laboring hard to get in his wheat and his hay that he might feed his family and pay his debts;--but his great labor and care are crushing his health and putting his very life in peril. See, he raises blood, and his cold night sweats but too plainly show that he must change his course and get relief, or his wife is a widow and his babes are orphans. The father sees all this in an instant. My son, he says, attend first to your precious health and do all you can to restore it and prolong your life; I will take care of your hay and your wheat; I will see that all the other things you need shall be added if you will only secure your precious life. So he writes home to his distant family that they need not expect him home again for a long time yet;--he finds business with his son of more importance than anything else can be.

Now this would be a striking case of parental sympathy and interest--just such a case as we have in our text of the parental care of our great Father for our salvation.

2. The disinterestedness of God is very affectingly manifested in this command and promise. What would you say of a father who should do as I have just represented? Just leave all care of your business to me, he says to his son; go at once into your house and take your bed as much as your health needs; and he sends home to the dear ones there that they must forego the pleasure of seeing him for some months yet, for here are other interests not his own which his heart will not allow him to leave neglected; this father you would say manifested a most admirable degree of disinterested affection. You might perhaps naturally expect all this of one who was really a father, yet it would show that indeed he had a father's heart. So of God. In making these provisions for supplying our earthly wants and in taking from our minds the burden of earthly cares, he has shown himself a God of love. That he should be so careful to urge us up to duty and to remove all hindrances so that nothing need divert or interrupt us--this indeed shows us a God full of goodness and rich in love.

3. To refuse to be diverted from God's service by worldly cares and to give our whole heart to the Lord, is the only way to make sure of earthly good. If any of you would make sure of whatever temporal good you need, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Then you shall have a promise which is infinitely more secure than any stocks or deposits in all the land. It will be safe to trust God. He who makes the rain and the sunshine; he who clothes the lilies and feeds the young ravens, knows how to reach your wants and fulfil his own promises. He cannot lack either the resources or the will.

4. Unbelief urges a very different course from this. Unbelief always professes to be sorely afraid of tempting God by neglecting temporal matters. So much afraid is it of overdoing this thing of having faith in God's explicit promises!

Now it cannot be doubted that the Savior meant to rebuke this unbelief and urge strongly the duty of casting all our care upon God, only taking care on our part that we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. He meant to show us that we have no room for fear about earthly good, provided we take all due care of our souls and of all the things of his kingdom.

And this was in our Lord a most wise and beneficent foresight. For who does not know that for one reason or for another, almost all persons are excusing themselves for neglecting the soul. The student must study. Most certainly, and without doubt, he must now get his lessons. What! do you call him away from his lessons to seek the kingdom of God first! What! he cries out, shall I not lose my education if I listen to such a call? Now is my harvest time--now is the time to cultivate my mind--I came here to study--it were a pity if I may not get my lessons first, and seek the kingdom of God when I have a convenient season!

Yet let me say here that ever so much proper attention to religion can never be any loss to us. It never robs us of other things which are really better. The student who seeks first the kingdom of God rationally, will not need to neglect any useful study. He cannot lose any thing on the whole by putting each and all things in their proper places, and giving to each its due measure of attention. The wise-minded student may not know so much of Shakespeare or of Byron--may have less to do with Homer or with Virgil; but he will not therefore fail of learning the things that are most useful. I do not hesitate to say that the student who shall obey this precept will come out ahead of all his fellow-students who disobey it; he will not be an intellectual drone, a lounging idler, only half awake to the value of knowledge, and only half alive to pursue it. No, his mind will apprehend the value of truth and will press forward with quenchless longings to attain it. Hence his mind will move under such impulses and be encompassed with such an atmosphere of light that he will be a better man, will have more of all useful knowledge, and will have a better balanced mind than any of his associates who seek first something else and not God's kingdom.

The same may be said of men of any condition in life--of those who till the ground--of those who fill the shop, or move behind the counter. Let a man any where obey this precept; you will find that his temporal wants will be supplied. He may not get so rich or get rich so fast or by such means as shall load himself down too much to run the Christian race at all--so much as to crush himself down to hell--this may not be his course, but he will have all real good.

5. Every thing really valuable must be lost by disobeying this command. If a man neglects the kingdom of God, nothing which he can obtain is really valuable to him. Suppose he gets an education. This will only aggravate his final condemnation.

I wonder if this is usually understood. Do these young men and young women understand this principle? It is plain and undeniable. Our future happiness and misery will be as our mental cultivation and as the

development of our intelligence. The more mental power and the wider range of views we have, the larger is the scope for bitter reflection, and the keener the pangs of self-reproach and remorse in that world where the wicked become their own worst tormentors.

Did you ever consider what Byron's state of mind must have been when he spent whole nights in writing poems to save his soul from the unutterable agonies of reflection upon himself--to keep himself from rolling in hell while he yet lived upon the earth! And do you ask, why was this? Because his mind was highly cultivated, and its original endowments were of the very first order--because he saw truth and its relations clearly, and felt its force deeply--and therefore could not bear the terrible reactions of such mental powers when they turned in upon his soul to scourge and lash himself as the guiltiest being on earth. In mental power and in self-inflicted torment too, he is like the devil. Perhaps one more like the devil never trod the earth.

Sinner, if you don't mean to serve God, I advise you to be as near an idiot as possible. Keep away from knowledge; go beyond the Rocky Mountains--go and fish for whales--shut off every flashing ray of light you can--contract your mind within the narrowest possible compass; don't seek knowledge unless you mean to pile up a mass of fuel that shall burn your soul forever. Keep away from knowledge and mental cultivation. What have you to do with an expanded mind, and sharpened intellect? It will only inflict the keener stings of remorse and furnish you the more scope for everlasting self-torment.

I said, nothing is valuable to you unless you mean to seek first the kingdom of God. Every enjoyment, even life itself, is a curse to him who is treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath. Every abused mercy augments that fearful treasure of wrath. The sooner you stop eating and drinking and breathing the better. "Every beating pulse you tell" will rise up in the judgment against you to swell the evidence of your great guilt in not seeking life when God besought you to live. It were better for you not to have lived at all unless you seek first the blessing of God and eternal life.

Hence, if you neglect to seek first the kingdom of God in pretense of seeking other good first, you are infinitely mistaken. You will lose the good you seek, and also the greater good you would not seek but should have sought. Let me tell that student who neglects the kingdom of God and drives his studies that he may keep up with his class or keep before them; that he drives on upon his own ruin. The good you seek to gain will be an infinite curse to you. If it should prove a blessing, it must be in spite of God's threatened curses; and surely you ought to know that it is a vain thing to fight against God. Surely whom the Lord blesses is blessed, and whom the Lord curses is cursed. You will find it so.

6. Again, it is plainly implied that if we seek first the kingdom of God, we shall not only have these other things promised, but have the kingdom of God too. Certainly our Lord meant to imply that we should have the very thing we seek first.

7. If we really obey this command, it will be manifest in all the arrangements of our common life. Observe a business man who obeys this command. He never takes upon himself any business which must crowd out a proper attention to religion. You will see in all his arrangements, that he makes provision for religious duties as much as he makes provision to eat his daily meals. When did you ever know a man lay out his business so as to reverse no time for his daily food and nightly sleep? Go into any house and you see provision made for sleeping and eating. You will see perhaps articles of food and means of cooking it. You will say--well, these people expect doubtless to eat and to sleep. This enters into their arrangements. So of every man who means to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness. Whatever his principle

business is, you will see his arrangements made accordingly. So long as he has his reason, he never can make his arrangements for his time so as to leave his principal business unprovided for. If his principal business be to seek the kingdom of God, everything will be shaped accordingly. He will no sooner fail to do this than fail to make his family arrangements for eating and sleeping.

But let us go into that student's room. We can probably learn what he is seeking first. The door opens; we pass along in; there are his books; there lies Byron and Shakespeare; let us look for his Bible. Aye, his Bible is not there; we look for it on the table, for possibly he keeps it there and goes to it regularly for his spiritual bread--but no, it is not there. Look under his pillow. Alexander the Great is said to have slept always with his Homer under his pillow--but not so with this student. You find no Bible there. At last it is found in the bottom of his trunk. It has not been opened since his mother put it there on the very day he left that home of his childhood. It was his mother who put it there we know; for see, she has marked many passages with her tears. O, she did hope this dear son would ponder and learn to love those blessed pages. With what throes of heart, such as none but a parent feels, did she send him away and commit him to her own Father and Savior. O, has he forgotten all a mother's prayers?

But perhaps the Bible has been taken out of his trunk, but has lain on his shelf unmoved until the dust has coated it over--a witness against him that he heeds not the words of eternal life. Or you find it at last on his table, but under his Cicero and a huge pile of newspapers and novels--ah, that youth is not seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. His arrangements are not made at all for this end.

But there is another scene. Here is a student's Bible worn with much and constant use--wet with many tears--Oh, how often has his soul been feasted as with angel's food from those exceeding great and precious promises!

It is said of one of the Apostles that after his death his knees were found to be callous from his frequent and long-continued kneeling in prayer. So it might be with you if you were really given to prayer and mighty wrestlings with God.

8. When persons are really engaged about their souls, they will not suffer themselves to be placed in circumstances so engrossing as to be crowded away from seeking God supremely. They would dread such a state worse than death.

9. Many hold this truth in theory who after all utterly deny it in practice. Almost every body will admit that we ought to seek first the kingdom of God, and that religion is the supreme business of life; yet how almost constantly is this denied in practice?

As I have kept my eye upon the course of things in this community, I have seen almost every thing crowded in here to draw men away from God. The students get up society after society to cultivate the intellect;--but where are the societies got up to cultivate the heart? If all were right here, should we not see a different course of things; should we not see something crowded in almost everywhere to make the heart better--to awaken religious feeling and arouse attention to religious truth, and carry abroad a religious influence over all hearts. O, if this truth were really believed, we should see it reduced to practice by the students and by all the church, let their vocation be what it may. But now we see a great many students constantly pressed--full of engrossing business and wasting care--and why? What are they doing? Are they making ceaseless efforts to promote their own or others spirituality? Their efforts surely are ardent and vigorous enough to lead you to suppose so. O, if such were only the fact!

But judging from the actual life of many of these students, one would suppose that Christ had said--Seek first to get your lessons--seek first to master your Algebra or your Latin. And the course of things in the business community is such as it might rightly be if Christ had said--Seek first to get your business done in good time and in the most perfect manner;--first see to it that your crops are duly sown and timely gathered; then shall all needful things be added to you.

Such is a very common state of things in this community. It is such also with many of the students, but not with all as I am happy to know. There are some here who show that their hearts are upon the Zion of God. But having made these exceptions, the rest seem to live as if Christ had said to the student--Get your studies first, and you shall lose nothing in point of spirituality.

The fact is, if we are ever going to be seriously and thoroughly pious, we must make all our arrangements accordingly. Wherever you see a man thoroughly pious, you see a man who in fact does make all his arrangements with a view to this great object. He will not let labor or business of any kind interfere with his going to meeting, when he can go without fearing to displease God by neglecting some other apparent duty. His seasons of prayer are too precious to be lost. He cannot on any account forego the pleasure of meeting with God a few times at least each day. He is conscious that he needs to be strengthened daily with might in the inner man. Hence he cannot live without prayer.

10. No Institution can do much to bless the world unless it practically sets religion foremost. I mean what I say--practically; not in theory only, but in practice. An Institution which takes some other practical ground, may make students intellectual--may train them well enough for the bar or for medicine; but students so trained, must suffer fearfully in their spirituality, and if they go into the ministry, they can do little indeed to promote the salvation of souls. They cannot have power without deep piety, and they cannot have this unless they seek it first. The first place is its only right place. Make piety a secondary thing in any Institution, and the Spirit of God feels himself dishonored, and cannot bless.

Oh, brethren, let us anchor this Institution fast to this only right principle--religion the chief concern--seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

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