

Third Mark of Maturity: “Kingdom Priorities”

“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness...” (Mt. 5:33).

To avoid conformity to the world and realize our call to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, we must daily manage our lives by the priorities of God's Kingdom. Prioritizing the development and demonstration of such things as (1) character (Mt. 5:3-12), (2) witness (13-16), (3) righteousness (17-48), (4) living in the presence of God (6:1-18), (5) freedom from anxiety and materialism (19-34), (6) caring relationships (7:1-12), and (7) fruitfulness (13-29) establish God's Kingdom and righteousness as the top priority in each disciple's life. The result of living out these priorities will be a developing and visible Christlike character and lifestyle which exhibits an investment in the work of the Kingdom by a wise and balanced management of time, fruitful use of gifts, and financial giving which demonstrates both financial freedom and faithfulness to the cause of Christ and the work of His Church (cf. Matt. 7:19-21, 33; Eph. 5:15-17; 1 Pet. 4:10; 1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 8:7; 9:6-15; Rom. 13:8, 11-14).

In His “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5-7) Jesus directs His words to His disciples (5:1, 2). The theme of this sermon is how his followers are to “*seek first* His kingdom and His righteous” (6:33). He instructs them as to how this is to be done under seven priorities: (1) their path to Christlike character (5:3-12, the Beatitudes); (2) their witness (5:13-16, as salt and light); (3) their personal practice of heart-deep righteousness (5:17-48); (4) living their lives in the presence of the Father (6:1-18); (5) their freedom from materialism and anxiety (6:19-34); (6) rules for truly caring relationships (7:1-12); and (7) true fruitfulness (7:13-27). Before we turn to explore each of these seven priorities we need to be mindful of what it means to “seek first.”

“Seek First”

To “seek first” means to seek the object of your seeking above all things, not lastly, not thirdly, not secondly, but first, before anything else, seek the kingdom of God. Before life, wealth, health, . . . before family, job, recreation, security, desires, dreams, or hopes, . . . before rest, relaxation, distractions, movies, TV, music, vacations, or holidays, . . . before your children, your spouse, your mother, your father, your brother, or your sister seek first His kingdom. Isn't it easy to lose touch with the simple or not give thought to the obvious? At the heart of His sermon we find these words embedded—**SEEK FIRST**. These words are to frame the sermon for us. What He teaches here is not optional, unnecessary, discretionary, or elective. It is of the utmost priority. It is to be sought first, before all other pursuits! With that simple statement we must frame all that He teaches us here. But He does not leave the object of this priority of all pursuits open to question or uncertainty.

“His Kingdom”

What is it that we are to give such utmost priority in our lives? Two objects: “His kingdom and His righteousness.” “His” is in reference to our Heavenly Father, our God, and our King. He is “*the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God*” (1 Tim. 1:17). He is “*the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see,*” to Whom belongs all honor and eternal dominion! (1 Tim. 6:15, 16). His kingdom is His rule, His reign, His dominion. This means for a disciple of Christ the obedient submission to His rule, reign, and dominion. This obedient submission to His rule, His kingdom, is that which we are to give our first priority. Our allegiance is first to Him. Our duty is first to Him, before we consider ourselves or anyone else or anything else. His will is first, never second, third or if nothing else works. The Apostle Paul put it this way: “*No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier*” (2 Tim. 2:4). Jesus simply said, “Seek first His kingdom!”

“His Righteousness”

The second object of this utmost priority is “His righteousness.” “His righteousness” is not meant as something different than “His kingdom,” but rather it distinguishes His kingdom. His rule, His sovereignty is forever characterized by His righteousness. His rule is a rule of perfect righteousness (Mt. 5:48). His righteousness exceeds, surpasses, and is beyond comparison to the hypocritical “righteousness” of the scribes and Pharisees, and so must be the righteousness of His disciples (5:20). His righteousness is His holiness, His goodness, His love, His wisdom, His grace, His mercy, His justice, and His wrath. It is all of these expressed singly and simply. This righteousness characterizes the rule of God, and thereby it is also to characterize the service of the children of the King. The object for Christ’s disciples is not simply service but righteous service. It is not simply getting the job done, but it demands that we get the job done in a righteous way, the same way God rules, in His righteousness. His disciples must always and only serve Him righteously! They must first and foremost serve Him kindly as He is kind, mercifully as He is merciful, in all goodness and love as He is good and loving, wisely as He is wise and according to the counsel of His Word and His Law. Haphazard service, careless service, unethical service, selfish service, prayerless service, evil service, unsacrificial service, irreverent service, judgmental service, faithless service, heartless service, these are unacceptable service in His kingdom. We must be holy as He is holy, righteous as He is righteous. This is the idea of seeking first “His righteousness.”

This “first” above all others is the hallmark, perhaps better, the birthmark of true disciples of Jesus Christ. For this reason we are told that Jesus took His disciples (not the crowds) up on the mount. “*He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying . . .*” (5:1). He gave them and us what we call the “Sermon on the Mount” (Mt. 5-7). In this sermon we are taught what it means to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.” Jesus develops His instruction around seven topics of discipleship, of living first for His kingdom and His righteousness. With each topic we find a priority of the His kingdom. When we live like this, we are fulfilling the utmost priority.

1. Character (Mt. 5:3-12)

Jesus lists eight “beatitudes” in which we find a pathway, a staircase, to Christ-like character. Each is a “Blessed” step in the forging of the likeness of Christ in us. Each step is distinct. Of the eight steps the first four are critical. They position our spirits to receive God’s lesson and blessing. They open the door for the Spirit to step in and do the work, which He alone can do—transform us. The second four release us to the world and to one another to practice the “blessing” which Jesus has taught us. This character change is to be a priority for us!

Here are the steps: **1) Poverty** (“poor in spirit”—in humiliation and hopelessness to realize your utter and inescapable dependency upon your Heavenly Father), **2) Grief** (“mourn”—grief over the tragedy and evil of yours and all sin), **3) Surrender** (“meek”—content under the control and command of the King), **4) Desire** (“hunger and thirst for righteousness”—an insatiable appetite to be like your Heavenly Father), **5) Compassion** (“merciful”—a compassion for others like the compassion shown to you), **6) Single-Mindedness** (“pure in heart”—to seek only the will of your Heavenly Father), **7) Reconcilers** (“peacemakers”—seek always peace through goodness and truth), and **8) Testing** (“persecuted”—to suffer for the sake of Christ which forges a mature and pure faith). It is never enough to walk through these steps or down this path once or twice. It must become a path with which we are intimately familiar. The deep change that comes with knowing God is a process like the peeling of an onion. With the peeling of each layer we go deeper, yet the steps are the same, so the path must be walked again and again, but with a new lesson, a new depth of faith and obedience is experienced.

2. Witness (Mt. 5:13-16)

Jesus teaches that His disciples are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world,” whose good works are their evidence, and, by which, they cause the world to see the source of their saltiness and brilliance, your

Heavenly Father, and resultantly the world is constrained to give Him His due glory. Each passage up the path charted by the Beatitudes forges a tangier saltiness and a more brilliant light, which more accurately portray the image of Jesus and our Heavenly Father. Only a changed life can truly witness to One who can “change you too.” Here we clearly learn that a true witness is not simply one with a message but one who is evidence of the message! Being such a message is the priority of being a witness.

3. Righteousness (Mt. 5:17-48)

The third priority is “righteousness” which has two reference points. First, it must surpass the righteousness “of the scribes and Pharisees” (v. 20), and second, it must duplicate the righteousness of your heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Mt. 6:33). In Jesus’ illustrations of such righteousness (vv. 21-48) he emphasized the depth of such righteousness. It is a righteousness not simply of restraint but of the motive of the heart (v. 28). It is not characterized by convenience but by radical sacrifice (vv. 29, 30). It is not simply reflective of social convention but seeks to duplicate the character of God (vv. 46-48). If the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees can be characterized as only “skin-deep,” as only going through the motions to receive the approval of men (6:1), or just playing a role but not being that person (hypocrites, 6:2, 5, 16, etc.), then the righteousness to which Jesus calls His disciples must be “heart deep” and must reflect the desire to glorify God in both motive and action, i.e. in every way, totally, completely. The first kind of righteousness is a sham. The second kind is a transformed person! Such is the true righteousness of the Kingdom!

As Jesus illustrates this priority He points the teachings of the Law, both the Law itself and the rabbinic commentary on the Law, and then He reveals the heart of the Law and the righteous heart of God. No games, no excuses, no rationalization or justification, rather all these things are stripped away and the brilliant beauty of God’s righteousness is revealed. **First**, the Law declared the unrighteousness of murder and judged it, but Jesus showed murder to be the fruit of anger and also manifest in assassination by words (vv. 21, 22). The root of murder is bitterness and anger, but there is more. Murder stems from an unwillingness to reconcile differences, to forgive and to seek peace (vv. 23-26), whether you are the innocent or guilty party. Such is the righteousness beneath the surface of the sixth commandment. Jesus moved **then** to the righteousness of the seventh commandment. Adultery is the fruit of a lustful heart. God’s righteousness is not simply to restrain from a physically immoral relationship but to cultivate a heart of fidelity and purity (vv. 27, 28). To preserve this purity may demand radical self-denial and sacrifice (vv. 29, 30). Sin must always be dealt with seriously and radically because of its infecting and pervasive nature. Jesus continued with the last four examples of Kingdom righteousness: **third**, the unrighteous nature of legal divorce (vv. 31, 32) demands a righteous, persevering, sacrificial, submissive, and reconciling heart (cf. Mt. 19:8; Eph. 5:22-33); **fourth**, the unrighteous manipulation of oaths is stripped away to reveal the righteousness of a faithful integrity which answers a simply yes or no (vv. 33-37); **fifth**, the justice and restraint of retaliation to injury and evil teaches a deeper righteousness of forbearing personal insult and injury (vv. 38-42) and reliance upon God’s vindication; and **last**, is the righteousness of the Father’s perfect love which teaches us to love our enemies not only our friends (vv. 43-48). In these examples Jesus gives us glimpses of the righteousness which surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees and which reflects the righteousness of His Kingdom. This is to be a daily priority in our lives.

4. Living In The Presence of God (Mt. 6:1-8)

This priority addresses spiritual disciplines or as Jesus calls them “*practicing your righteousness*” (v. 1). He addresses the giving of alms (vv. 2-4), prayer (vv. 5-14), and fasting (vv. 16-18). He contrasts for us again the practice of the scribes and Pharisees and God’s true desire for His children. The first are characterized by public demonstrations of these disciplines, but they had wholly missed the point, and God rejects their worship. They seek to please men and gain their applause (vv. 1, 2, 5, 16), and this is all they will receive (vv. 2, 5, 16). The contrasting practice Jesus teaches is to hide your practices of righteousness from the eyes of men and even your own pride (vv. 3, 4, 6, 17, 18). Desire only to find yourself and your actions pleasing to your heavenly Father

(vv. 4, 6, 18). True worship is to enter into the presence of your Father for His pleasure and honor and no one else's. Such worship, such practice of righteousness, must be the priority of the disciples of Jesus.

5. Freedom From Anxiety And Materialism (Mt. 6:19-34)

Jesus then addressed the issue of materialism – *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth-”*(v. 19). His antidote is to *“store up for yourselves treasures in heaven - ”* (v. 20). If one is going to seek first His Kingdom, then he or she must not be enslaved to materialism. Jesus then announced *“the heart rule.”* This is a truism of life: *“where your treasure is there your heart will be also”* (v. 21). Jesus is not deceived to think we can put our hearts anywhere we choose. As a compass always seeks north, so our hearts always seek that which we truly treasure. What we treasure determines where our hearts will be. If we treasure things on earth (materialism), then our hearts will always be set upon earthly things. Treasure what is in heaven, and your heart will treasure heavenly things. Jesus compared it to the glaze of the eye, where you look with your eyes is where your body goes (vv. 22, 23). If you look in a good place you go to the good place, but if your eye is set upon that which is evil you will seek it out. Your heart cannot serve two masters (v. 24), so where your treasure is will determine the master you serve.

This issue of materialism is addressed repeatedly in Jesus' ministry – the rich young ruler (Mt. 19:16-26), the parable of the sower (Mt. 13:22), the parable of the rich fool (Lu. 12:13-21), and Zaccheus (Lu. 19:1-10), to mention only a handful. There is great insight and clarity in Jesus' instruction: you cannot seek two firsts. There is only one *“first.”* This must be the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. He sternly warns us not to be deceived by the powerful allurements of materialism with both its consuming and compromising effect. Every disciple of Jesus must deal with materialism, or he will find himself a disciple in name only because he is not following Jesus but pursuing materialism!

Yet, to forsake materialism can be quite an anxious experience. Materialism offers security from cold, hunger, and comfort against the years to come. Jesus addresses this anxiety, *“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”* (v. 25). Jesus then asks, is this all there is in life the pursuit of comfort, long-life, food, drink, and clothing? His response to his question is, of course not! Life is about seeking first God's Kingdom and His righteousness (v. 33). These are the heavenly treasures, which fill heaven and will overflow your earthly life.

Jesus anticipates his anxious disciples concerns, but what about these necessities for life? If we do not seek these we will die! Jesus responds, as God providentially provides for the birds of the field (v. 26) and the flowers of the field (vv. 28-30), so He will provide for His children. Yours is to trust your heavenly Father (v. 30) and *“seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you”* (v. 33). The antidote is first faith and second the activity of service to the King.

Jesus here is not counseling disregard for earthly necessities, but rather He points His finger at the consuming desire to live as though these are all there is to life. Responsible stewardship and diligent responsibility are not the issues at stake here, but rather that the disciple must not seek after the necessities of life like the godless seek (v. 32) or to seek these things first before the Kingdom (v. 33). Only resting in God's providential provision can free us from worldly anxiety!

6. Caring Relationships (Mt. 7:1-12)

Jesus' disciples are to demonstrate their priority pursuit of God's kingdom and His righteousness in the arena of developing truly caring relationships. This is the sixth priority of His sermon (7:1-12), and it is cast in **five rules for developing truly caring relationships.**

The first rule is not to judge others. Jesus said, *"Do not judge so that you will not be judged"* (v. 1). The judgment to which He refers is probably the ultimate judgment of one's salvation, yet if James is an apt commentator then it also refers to criticism in general especially that which is not based upon the Word of God. *"Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor? (James 4:11, 12).* Jesus takes this warning a step further teaching us the consequence of judging others from our own convictions, opinions, and scruples. *"For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you"* (v. 2). It reminds us that whatever standard we use to become critical others this same standard will be applied to us. Therefore, the implication is that we should be gracious and merciful in all our relationships (v. 2). Only God and His Word may bring judgment.

The second rule is that our critical bent should always and most harshly be focused upon ourselves first. Only after we have dealt with our own failures and weaknesses will we be ready to help a brother or sister in their same struggles. *"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"* (vv. 3-5). The rule is self-confrontation first, followed by self-mastery, then become a helper to others.

The third rule is the rule of prudence. *"Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces"* (v. 6). Do not share everything with everyone. Do not share holy things with people who disregard holy things. Share only what will be respected. Do not share things of great value with those who demonstrate no appreciation of value. Be prudent. Be discerning. Be wise.

The fourth rule is the rule of prayer. *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."* (v. 7). If we have rightly understood the context of this instruction, i.e. that each is linked together to form these rules for developing truly caring relationships, then we must see that our expectations in relationships will never be fulfilled apart from asking, seeking, and knocking. In relationships we are dealing with "evil" people (v. 11), but even so, they can give good gifts, i.e. gifts which benefit others. By contrast only He who is perfectly good can really give "good gifts," and these He is waiting to give to those who will ask, seek, and knock (v. 11). The rule of prayer cautions us not to expect too much from relationships because God is the only one who truly can meet our needs with His good gifts.

The final rule is the golden rule. *"In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets"* (v. 12). Make a list of everything and every way you wish people would treat you, then go out and give other people these things in these ways. This is the golden rule of caring relationships and it fulfills the Law and the Prophets.

In these five rules Jesus instructs us how to develop caring relationships because people, and our relationships with them, are to reflect the God we serve and our relationship with Him. Such relationships are to be a priority in our lives. A disciple of Jesus will be known to the world when he loves others as Jesus loved (Jn. 13:34, 35).

7. Fruitfulness (Mt. 7:13-29)

Jesus uses the image of two gates: one is a wide gate, but it leads to destruction; and the other is narrow, but it leads to life. Many go through the wide gate and only few go through the narrow gate (vv. 13, 14). False prophets, wolves in sheep's clothing, will come preaching and calling to enter the wide gate (v. 15). Many will listen and enter. You can know false prophets from true by the fruits of their lives, by their priorities (vv. 16, 20). As good trees produce good fruit and bad trees bad fruit, so you can know them (vv. 17-20). You cannot

know them by their words or their powers (v. 21). Many will say, “Lord, Lord” (v. 21). Jesus knows those who are His own (v. 23). You can know them because their deeds will be lawless, and their fruits will be evil (vv. 17, 23). Thus, you must be like the wise man who seeks first God’s kingdom and righteousness, and who pursues the priorities of His Kingdom. The wise will demonstrate themselves wise by producing good fruit (vv. 24-27). This is one who hears the words of Jesus and does them. For such a one is truly Jesus’ disciple (v. 24)!

Conclusion:

We should learn at least three things from this Third Mark of Maturity: Kingdom Priorities. **First**, we should learn great humility and poorness of spirit for we will be faced with how greatly we fall short of these priorities. We will in this life be always seeking them and realizing them only in part. **Second**, we should realize how comprehensively they set us on the path to the narrow gate. One, because they remind us that it is our faith in the work of Christ, which saves us not our achievements. Two, that this great grace received sets upon us a call and is truly evidenced not by our words but by our seeking first His Kingdom and His righteousness. Three, herein, the priorities are markers which light our way; they give us clear instructions and directions. **Third**, these Kingdom Priorities should call us to great resolution of purpose to answer our calling with diligence and faithfulness to duty, but such resolve by itself is not enough unless captured and nourished by a great growing love for God and our Lord. Always remember, spending daily intimate time with Him and His Word fans the flame of our love for Him creating a swelling hunger for Him, His Kingdom and His righteousness.