

Laurentian Wesleyan Church
Sunday, January 3, 2016
Sermon: First Things First

Opening Illustration:

"I want some pie."

"Eat your dinner first."

On some level we know this. If over this past Christmas season I had said to Chrissy, "There's a lot going on. Lots to do. People to see. Places to go. If there's time after I do all these things to spend with you, we'll see you then." Ha. If I actually said that, well, let's just say there's lots of time to think in the dog house.

What we put first in our lives matters.

Scripture: "But seek first his kingdom, and all these things will be given to you as well." - Matthew 6:33, NIV

What are "all these things"? If you read a few verses up, it really means all your needs. Jesus said when you put God's kingdom first on your priority list, your needs will be taken care of. What we put first in our lives has a huge impact on us personally, our finances, our job, our family, and our world.

When we put God first, He blesses the other parts of our life. As we begin a new year, we're going to look at four firsts.

This is teaching based on a sermon by Chris Beall at Livechurch in Oklahoma.
<https://open.church/resources/2008-first-things-first>

I believe that as we put God first in these four areas of our lives, it won't just change 2016, it will change your life. So how do we seek His kingdom first?

1. First of the Day: Seek God.

As we begin each day, it's important to acknowledge that this is the day that God has given us. These idea of seeking God in the morning is throughout scripture but none are more impacting than Jesus' example.

"When we look at the four gospels in the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The four accounts of the life of Christ. We see all kinds of repeated behaviors in his life...He repeatedly and consistently got away and got alone with the Father. Even in moments where people were still sick and needed Him to heal them, He still got away to connect with his father. It's not even just that we know that He got away. We know often when He got away."

"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." -Mark 1:35, NIV

Probably before everyone else.

Before the busyness of the day started to press in.

Before the noise of life fill the air.

Before even the sun rose.

Jesus got alone with the Father. Sometimes in the church we call this our devotions, or time along with God. And of course, we're reminded that if the Son of God needed to do that, then how much more do we need to?

Are you a morning person? I know that some of you are. If you had your way, we'd have church at 8:00am. Some of you are natural morning people. I think the rest of us are secretly jealous in many ways, because we know that the morning can be a hugely productive time. Some of you have had to learn to be morning people. You can tell that my sister-in-law Sarah is not a natural morning person, but the kids get up at about 6:30am, so she doesn't really have a choice. Even when the kids stay up late, like on New Year's Eve, they will still get up at 6:30 in the morning. I must confess, I am not a natural morning person. I have to be very intentional about getting up really early. But I do know that there is something important about acknowledging God first in your day. Before you get going in whatever your day holds, to stop, and acknowledge that this day is His.

Illustration: *Have you ever thought about why we don't say grace after our meal instead of before?*

If you have found that reading your Bible before you go to bed works for you, awesome. Keep it up. I know that some of you take your Bible to work and read it there. Great. I know that many of us have various times throughout the day that we pray and ask God's help, direction. Keep on keeping on. But; and I'm speaking to myself as much as any of you; it's good to acknowledge God at the beginning of your day.

Can I just press the pause button here for a moment. As we begin this new year, there is perhaps nothing that we could do as a church that would have a greater impact than the spend time seeking God through prayer and the Bible. But there are all sorts of things that keep us from doing it.

Comparing Ourselves to Others.

We hear that such and such spends three hours every morning in prayer and reads the Bible through every 90 days. And we assume that's what God must want us to do, and we quit, because for most of us, that is just not a possibility.

Habits Are Hard Break & Start.

Putting God first in a tangible way each day often doesn't come naturally. Sometimes it takes some of the big "D" word, Discipline. We hear things like, "anything worthwhile usually has some work attached to it." And life floods in and our usual habits can take over.

Who Has the Time?

Life is busy. Whatever stage of life you find yourself in, sometimes a week goes by and you ask yourself "where did the time go?"

Sometimes we can get discouraged. But can I remind us of a foundational truth. God wants to spend time with you. He doesn't *NEED* you to put His kingdom first. It is first. He's God. He *WANTS* you to put Him first. So stop comparing yourself to others, some obsessing how hard it

is to get into new routines or wondering when you'll find the time, and ask yourself this simple question, "God, what would you have me do?"

We seek first His kingdom by putting Him first in our day. Secondly,

2. First of the Week: Worship.

Sunday is the first day of the week. We meet to worship on Sunday because it was the day that Jesus rose from the dead, but we also are following the early church's example. Acts 20:7 says, "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread." We carry on that practice of worshipping God on the first day of the week. Although we typically don't share a meal, we do want this to be a place of community and connection. We come together to worship. Collectively. Communally.

I know I'm preaching to the choir here, because you're listening to me, but do you make seeking God through worship a priority each week? The early church is described as devoting themselves to the Apostles teaching, to the breaking of bread, to fellowship and to prayer. Devoted themselves. With glad and sincere hearts. They met together in large groups to worship, but they also met each other in their homes. And what was happening in the midst of all that? The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved and starting to follow Christ.

Illustration: A few years ago, Teresa attended LifeChurch in Oklahoma because someone invited her. Teresa and her family were hurting. Their marriage was falling apart. They're struggling with addiction. All they new was that LifeChurch was a good place to come for hurting people, and so they came. And God helped restore their family. They got involved in a weekly small group. They started serving on Sundays. Their lives looked like this picture we have in the book of Acts. They were devoted. But somewhere along the way they had a setback. Things went poorly. They were embarrassed about it. They didn't want to be honest with the church about what was really going on in their lives, and so the next thing they knew, they disappeared from church. A year went by, and one of the pastors saw Teresa in the lobby of the church. As Teresa walked through the door of the church, she broke down and wept. The pastor put his arm around her, and I said, "Teresa, I've missed you. How are you?" She said, "Pastor, I cannot believe I forgot how much I need this place."

Sometimes we think of church as a bonus to our week. A good start. But I'd love for us to get past that and be a place of real community. Where we need each other. A place that your soul needs. It needs to be a priority. I love the connections I see between people in our church. May it increase.

The author of Hebrew's says it this way. Let us not give up meeting together as some or in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another. On the first of the day, no one or nothing gets my time until I've had it with the Lord, and the first of the week we are going to worship God and worship him together.

How else can we seek God's Kingdom and put Him first?

3. First of the Month: Tithe.

A tithe is a tenth. In the book of Leviticus (27), it talks about a tithe being more than just about money. Of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs

to the Lord. It is Holy to the Lord. A tithe. A tenth. The first tenth. It's not even just ten percent of your income Church. It is the first tenth. Remember what I said. God must be first. He cannot not be first. When we put him first the rest of our life is filled with order and provision and blessing.

A tithe, not only is it the Lord's. Not only does it belong possessively to God, but he goes the extra mile to say it is Holy to God.

Recently Chrissy talked to a man who said, "I used to go to church, but they wanted 10% of my money." Listen, we're not requiring you to give to our church. If you're freaked out about this whole tithe thing, it's ok. We're not after your money. We want something for you, not from you. But we do pray that you would come to know the joy of giving. The joy of putting God first in your finances too.

Before I tell this short story, I need to explain something that is happening in our society that many churches have chosen to address. More and more people are using digital ways of paying for things. They're not using cash or cheques as often. And many churches offer things like debit, pre-authorized payments, online giving and even things like "text to give". It's a reminder to us that the message is to put God first in our finances. The method of how to do that can change to better serve the culture. The following story won't make sense without knowing that.

Illustration: Noah was a 15 year old boy. He just started his first job at a fast food restaurant. He was excited to earn his first pay cheque. Now his family was eating a meal together. As his dad recounts, "One of the unpardonable sins in our home is that when we're at the table having dinner together, your phone is not out and your thumbs are not moving. [We were] having a good time being together. Chips and salsa are happening, and I see Noah pull his phone out and his thumbs start moving. Inside I'm becoming The Incredible Hulk. "Noah, what do you think you're doing?" He said, "Dad I'm sorry. I know I'm not supposed to have my phone out, but I just got a notification that my first paycheck hit my checking account, and so I just wanted to text my tithe to the church." This moment of anger became this moment of pride as a father. So much so that I took my phone out took a picture of him celebrating that he just gave his tithes. He then said he was mad at me because now I'm a hypocrite because my phone's out as well."

Isn't that awesome? A 15 year old teen who is a follower of Christ putting God first in his finances. "Before I do anything. Before I spend anything. The first belongs to God."

"You may be listening to this and saying, "Wait a second, for me to give God the first 10 percent of my income first before I pay any other bill, I would have to utterly rearrange every aspect of my life to do that." Exactly. That's the whole point of all of this. The whole point is that we are choosing to rearrange our whole world so that God is first." And I believe with all my heart, if put God first in your finances, God will bless you for it. You'll be amazed at how far the 90% goes.

Listen, if you're listening to this and thinking, "I knew it, the church is all about money." Well, no, it's not. The church is all about hearing from God. So I encourage you to seek God and His will for you money, and I'm comfortably with what He tells you.

In the first of our day we seek Him. The first of our week we worship Him together. The first of the month or whenever you get paid we're going to offer and worship God with our tithe. Lastly ...

4. First of the Year: Fast.

Fasting is denying yourself physical nutrition for the purpose of pressing in to God's presence. Seeking Him. For many people, we think of Lent, the 40 days before Easter when many people give up something. That's great, but sometimes I think we forget that the purpose of giving it up is to make time for prayer. That's what fasting is about. "People fast for all kinds of different reasons. They fast for someone who's sick to be healed. They fast because they have a big decision to make, and I'm going to offer this fast God to seek clarity. Others, I just want to feel God's presence more in my life. I want to be more on fire for the things of God than I've ever been before, so I'm going to offer a fast to God."

All throughout Scripture you see fasting. There's even three times in the Bible that we know of where people fasted for 40 days. Moses, receiving The Ten Commandments fasted for 40 days. Elijah on the mountain encountering the Lord fasted for 40 days. Jesus himself, in the desert being tempted, fasted for 40 days. I will not claim to have made fasting a priority in my life, but in my own words, fasting means we're serious about making time for God.

"In Galatians 5:16 Paul said, "So I say walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." He says, "I need you to walk by the Holy Spirit that I've imparted to you so that you will not fulfill the desires of your flesh." He goes on to say, "For the flesh desires, it hungers for what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is contrary to the flesh." He ends this verse by saying, "For they are in conflict with each other."

What is our flesh? It is what our physical bodies want. It is what our sinful nature craves. That's the flesh. The Spirit is the Holy Spirit within us. **Both of them are hungry.** The question is, which will you feed? Think about it. Why do we fast? **We are going to deny our fleshly appetite what it wants for the sole purpose of feeding what the Holy Spirit wants...** Whatever you feed will grow, and whatever grows will become dominant. If you feed your flesh anything it wants, you will be led in your life entirely by your flesh, but if we deny the flesh and we feed the Spirit ... What does the Spirit long for? Intimacy with the Father. God's Holy word. Worship. A life of obedience and faith. When we feed the Spirit, the Spirit grows and now we are led and empowered completely and solely by the Spirit. That is why we fast. So that we would be a group of people that don't only just profess a faith in God, but we live a life propelled by Him. It is a life led by God's Spirit.

I think fasting can be powerful because it is something tangible. Something we do. We're taking away something. Sometimes something that we probably shouldn't have anyway...like a fast from pop or sweets. But sometimes something that we need, like an entire meal. We're taking away something perhaps that we need to pursue something we need more.

I'd like to challenge you to try fasting this next month.

How will you put God first in 2016?

In your day, your week, your month and the year?