

# Who's on First?

M. W. Bassford, 5-26-13

Back in the 1930's, the Abbott and Costello comedy duo wrote a sketch entitled "Who's on First?" In the sketch, Abbott is attempting to tell Costello the names of the players on a baseball team. The problem is that the players all have ambiguous names like Who, What, and I Don't Know, so that when Abbott says, "Who's on first", as in "The player Who is on first base", Costello interprets that as a question and becomes confused. They continue in that vein for some time. Everybody here who's over 70 knows what I'm talking about. If you're under 30, look it up on YouTube.

In a much more serious vein, it's all too easy for Christians today to become confused about who's in first in our lives. We assemble here weekly, we sing hymns like, "I Am Thine, O Lord", we affirm in Bible class that God has to be the center of our existence, and yet, we often lead lives that are inconsistent with the stirring things that we say. If we allow that to continue unchecked, it will cost us our souls. It's our responsibility to constantly examine our lives to make sure that our behavior aligns with the profession of our faith. Let's ask this morning, then, "Who's on first?"

## Misplaced Priorities

As there is a right way to order our lives, there is a wrong way too. We're going to begin this morning by examining some of the ways we can misplace our priorities. One of the most obvious mistakes here is when we put **OUR PLEASURES** first instead of God. Look at Paul's words in 1 Timothy 5:5-6. There are obviously a lot of passages in Scripture that condemn a life lived according to the lusts of the flesh, but this is one of the most vivid of them. Note that Paul says of this licentious widow that she is dead even while she lives. That's what the pleasure-seeking life boils down to. It is a living death. For one thing, the more time we spend in immorality, the more we punish our bodies. I see this on Facebook sometimes, when I look at current pictures of some people with whom I went to high school and college. Some of my peers look about as old as I do, but others look 10, 15 years older. They've been out there drinking and using drugs and sleeping around, and my goodness, does the life of pleasure put some miles on the odometer!

However, the morbid nature of the fleshly life is best seen in the spiritual, not the physical, realm. It is a living death because we're wasting our lives. We're living a bestial, pointless existence, even though we have the capacity to choose to do better. What is more, as unpleasant as the earthly consequences of immorality can be, it doesn't get any better than this for the pleasure-seeker. Once their lives end, they will die eternally too. It is certainly true that the devil can dress up fleshly pleasure to make it look appealing, but that appealing guise is nothing more than a trap. He seeks to destroy us, not give us good things, and if we fall for the lure of pleasure, he will certainly accomplish his ends.

Second, we often put the wrong priority on **OUR POSSESSIONS**. Jesus explains the problem with this in Matthew 16:26. It's worth noting that these mistaken priorities are listed in decreasing order of obviousness. I think that even people in the world know that the debauched life is a disastrous life. Societally, we don't have a whole lot of respect for drunks and drug addicts and serial adulterers. However, when it comes to material goods, the message is very different. According to every commercial on TV, every banner ad on the Internet, we ought to be living lives that are materially focused. They claim that the more stuff we have, the happier we will be. Actually, that's not true. Studies have shown that one of the least satisfying things we can do with our money is to buy things with it. No matter how nice the house or the car or the smartphone, soon it will become just another possession, and we will take no pleasure in it.

Jesus, however, points out an even more fundamental problem with the materially focused life. If our lives consist of our possessions, our materialistic outlook will certainly cost us our souls, and even if we owned the whole world, gaining all that couldn't make up for the loss of our souls. Though our souls are eternal, our possessions are only temporary, and that has some significant implications. Let me put it like this: As I think most of you know, I enjoy working on home-improvement projects. Before I bought my current home, though, I spent about ten years living in apartments, and all that time I spent in apartments, I never did even one DIY project. I never remodeled a bathroom. I never tiled a kitchen floor. One of my apartments had a leaky roof, and I didn't even fix that! Why? Because the apartments didn't belong to me, and I knew that whatever resources I put into them, I wouldn't get to keep. Well, guess what, friends? We don't get to keep ANY of the things we have on this earth. If we're smart enough to know that we shouldn't waste our time remodeling apartments, why should we waste our lives accumulating stuff?

Third, **OUR WORK** itself is something we can put on first ahead of God. Solomon comments on this error in Ecclesiastes 2:11. This too is not something that our society is inclined to accept. We have contempt for those who are too lazy to work, we value those who are willing to work hard, and when people say, "I'm a workaholic", that takes on almost the character of a humblebrag. Even the Bible tells us that we ought to work so that we can support ourselves.

However, when our work becomes the end of our lives rather than a means to more important ends, we've got a problem. It's great to work so that we can support our families, so that we can help others in need, and so that we can contribute to the Lord's work. It's even fine to find enjoyment in the work we do. However, when we find so much enjoyment in our work that we neglect God and others, we are replacing what is meaningful in our lives with what is

meaningless. No matter how much we accomplish, no matter how much we enjoy accomplishing it, the time will come when we must acknowledge that it is emptiness and vanity. How many of us are doing work that will be remembered 100 years from now? How about 200? In truth, the people who come after us won't have any more mind for our work than we have for the work of the people who came before us. It's wasted effort that leads to a wasted life.

Even though family is more important than our jobs, it is true that even **OUR FAMILIES** can become more important to us than they should. We can learn this from Jesus' stark warning in Matthew 10:37. There's a reason why we often refer to our families as our loved ones. We recognize that it is natural for us to love our families and value their good. However, the devil is cunning enough to use even something as valuable as the bonds of family affection to turn us away from God. We may be godly, but others in our families may not be. When that situation arises, what do we do? Do we put distance between that family member and ourselves so that we can grow closer to God, or do we move away from God so that we can follow our families? There are any number of ways this can happen. We can be lured into sin or false religion because that's what our families practice. Alternatively, we can distort the Scriptures until they appear to condone some sin that a family member is practicing. This is perhaps most common in the area of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Do we insist on the truth of Matthew 19, even when it affects those closest to us, or do we tell them comforting lies instead? If we aren't careful, our families can become a powerful force for evil in our lives, not for good.

Finally, of course, we can put **OURSELVES** on first instead of God. This appears in the next verse in the same context we looked at, in Matthew 10:38-39. This is a particularly tough concept for Americans to swallow. After all, enshrined in our Declaration of Independence is the idea that everybody has the right to pursue happiness in any way they see fit. We insist that nobody can tell us what to do! Once we obey the gospel, though, our lives don't belong to us anymore. Instead, they belong to God. He gets to make all the important decisions for us, and there is nothing in our lives that we are allowed to hold back from Him. Either we accept that, or we don't. There is no middle ground. If we spend our lives claiming to be wholly devoted to the Lord, yet constantly trying to claw back pieces of our lives from Him, we might be fooling ourselves, but we aren't fooling God. He knows where our hearts are, and if our hearts are set on ourselves and not Him, He has no use for us.

### **On First for Jesus**

In the second part of our study this morning, we're going to turn our attention, as we invariably do, to Jesus, to learn who, and indeed what, was on first for Him. This will also help us to prepare for the Lord's Supper. First, even a cursory study of the life of our Lord reveals that He placed great importance on **GOD'S WORD**. Consider His words in Matthew 5:17. Jesus, of course, had a unique relationship with the Law of Moses. When He said that He came to fulfill it, He meant that in two senses. He fulfilled it both by keeping it and by fulfilling the prophecies about Him that it contained. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Jesus' life was defined by fulfilling the Law.

Too often, though, we have a different perspective on God's revelation. We aren't interested in carrying out His commandments to the greatest extent possible. Instead, we seek to fulfill His word as little as we can get away with while pursuing what is truly important to us. Perhaps we are grudging in the time we devote to the Lord, so that we assemble on the first day of the week because we think we "have to", while neglecting other opportunities during the week to join the saints in study and worship. Perhaps we prefer the comfortable rituals and practices of our human traditions to the upward call of discipleship. There are any number of ways we can soothe our consciences with half-hearted obedience while neglecting the command to seek first the kingdom of God. Can we imagine Jesus trying to cheat God in that way? If not, we shouldn't behave that way either.

Second, Jesus gave **HIS FRIENDS** a significant place in His life. Look with me at the implied promise of John 15:13-14. We, of course, know that in less than 24 hours, Jesus would do exactly what He described. He would lay down even His life for the sake of His friends. What's interesting about this is that it appears to contradict something we saw earlier. Jesus condemns those who put their families first. Are we supposed to value others, or aren't we? The key, I think, is what form our regard takes. A lot of people will turn their backs on God for the sake of their loved ones. Jesus, by contrast, was willing to do anything to bring those He cared about closer to God. People who didn't want to seek God or obey Him weren't among those Jesus counted as friends. In our lives, then, we must both recognize the danger posed by people close to us who aren't concerned with spiritual things and recognize the opportunity presented by our loved ones who do care about their souls. If we put too high a value on the people who don't care, they will drag us down too. However, if we value our friends who love the Lord even more than we value ourselves, we will be rendering them the best service we possibly can.

Third, Jesus put **HIS GOALS** on first. This is apparent from His reply to Herod in Luke 13:31-32. To me, this is an extremely interesting answer for our Lord to give. He doesn't take the hint and flee to Judea. He doesn't stick out His tongue at Herod and say, "Whatcha gonna do about it?" Instead, He says quite simply that He has a goal to accomplish, and that neither Herod nor anyone else is going to stop Him from accomplishing it.

Although obviously our goal doesn't have the same cosmic importance of Jesus' goal, God has defined our mission in life too. Our goal is to get to heaven and take as many other people with us as possible. Just about everything in our lives is either going to help us on to that goal or hinder us from achieving it, if only by distracting us from what is truly important. Sometimes, life seems so complicated to us, with so many different choices. However, if we look at life in terms of what we want to accomplish, a lot of decisions that appeared so complex suddenly become quite simple. We just ask what choice is more likely to help us on to eternal life, and make that one. If we consistently live according to our goal, we will make some decisions that will bewilder the people around us, but we will also ensure that we will lay hold of the prize that Jesus has promised.

Finally, in the very first place of all, Jesus put **HIS GOD**. His attitude toward His Father is prophetically described in Hebrews 10:7. It's one thing to say that we belong to God. It's another thing to mean it. Jesus meant it. There was nothing in His life, even that life itself, that He did not surrender willingly to God.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's explore this concept in a couple of different directions. First, let's remember what an amazing man Jesus was. It's incredible to me that He could be so singlemindedly, passionately devoted to God and to His brethren that He lived perfectly for more than 30 years without a single misstep. Some days, it feels like I can't go for more than five minutes without messing up. It's not that Jesus couldn't have sinned. He was tempted in all points just as we are. It's that He was determined not to, and He didn't. His behavior was perfectly aligned with His priorities, and we are here to honor the greatness of His love and sacrifice.

Second, though, let's consider ourselves in this regard. We know what a God-centered life looks like because Jesus lived one. What do we see when we examine our own? We say the right things, just like Jesus did, but how does our behavior line up with our priorities? Whom are we really putting on first? We need to be honest about this and make the corrections that Jesus' sacrifice demands. Let's think on this as we partake.

### **Putting God on First**

If, then, God ought to be the first priority in our lives as He was in the life of Christ, we need to figure out how to put Him first. This process has to begin with learning to **SEE THE UNSEEN**. Paul raises this point in 2 Corinthians 4:18. At first glance, this seems like a contradiction in terms. How can we see something that is invisible? Paul, of course, isn't talking about literally seeing God or Jesus or any of the other entities of the spiritual realm. He's talking about learning how to perceive them. Part of this perception involves learning to see the visible world as it actually is. Earth is beautiful in many different ways, but it is a fatally flawed place. As long as we live here, we can never know perfect peace. Fear and disappointment will continually plague us. What's more, sooner or later we're going to pass from this life, and one day the earth and its works will all be consumed. If we're living for the things of this life, then, we can never be more than wasting our time.

The hidden realm of heaven, by contrast, is everything that this world is not. It is a place of perfect joy, perfect rest, where our reward will never be taken from us. What is more, we will get to spend eternity with the God whom we have so earnestly sought. The life to come can be incomparably better than this life, but only if we plan now to gain our inheritance then. Otherwise, we will never taste the delights of heaven.

Second, we need to learn to **EVALUATE OURSELVES**. Consider Paul's words in Ephesians 5:15-16. I like the way the New King James translation puts this when it talks about "walking circumspectly". The word "circumspectly" literally means "looking around", carefully considering where we are and where we've been to determine how to get to where we need to go. I think a lot of Christians are dissatisfied with their spiritual lives. They know they should be up there on that level spiritually, but they find themselves down here on this level. They don't like it, but they don't have a clue about how to change it.

If we want to change it, the only way to accomplish that is to take a hard look at our lives. It's kind of like spiritual budgeting. If we don't track our money, we won't ever know why we aren't meeting our financial goals, and if we don't track the way we live, we won't ever know why we aren't meeting our spiritual goals. We may literally need to keep a spiritual diary the way some people keep a spending diary. That will point out the things in our lives that we don't even think about that are standing between us and God. For instance, let's say that we think we need to read the Bible more, but we can't ever find the time. Well, if a study of our lives reveals that we come home from work, flip on the TV, and watch it for two hours, that tells us where our time is going. Time, like money, is a finite resource, and we need to make sure we're spending our time on important things.

Third, if we want to keep God in the right place, we have to **PRAY**. We have to follow Isaiah's instruction in Isaiah 55:6-7. There's probably an infinite number of reasons why we should pray, but this morning, I want to focus on only one of them. It is true that God delights in our prayers. The book of Revelation describes them as the spiritual equivalent of incense. However, prayer isn't primarily for Him. It's primarily for us. Nor is it primarily for us in the way that we think. The purpose of prayer isn't so that we can get stuff. Instead, what prayer does for us is it re-centers our minds on God. When we thank God for our meals before we eat them, that reminds us that without His blessing, we

wouldn't even have food to sustain us. When we look up at the stars and glorify God for their beauty, we inevitably also remember that He is the Creator of heaven and earth. When we appeal to Him for help with a problem at work, it makes us acknowledge that God is the only One who can help. To sum up, the more we pray, the more we make our lives about God. When we don't spend that time in prayer, suddenly it becomes easy to forget Him. That sense of the nearness of God that we get from praying may well be more important for our souls than all the blessings He bestows put together.

Finally, and I know this point will shock you, coming from me, but if we want God in first place, we have to **PERSEVERE** in making sure He stays there. Let's read together from Hebrews 6:11-12. The saying goes that good things come to those who wait. I think it's more accurate to say, "Good things come to those who work hard and don't give up." It is absolutely true that we are saved by grace through faith. None of us can hope to achieve righteousness through works of perfect law-keeping. However, each one of us does have the responsibility to remain faithful to God to live as His people. We have the responsibility to hold no other gods before Him, and everything we talked about in the first part of this lesson can become an idol that lures us away from Him. The only way to keep our lives continually turned toward God is to work at it. Likewise, if we know there's something in our lives that has to change, the only way to make the change is to keep doing it until the change becomes second nature. This isn't an easy process, but it is a necessary one, and God will make sure that we find success if we rely on Him.