

KINGDOM FIRST

Vincent Cheung

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PO Box 15662, Boston, MA 02215, USA

<http://www.vincentcheung.com>

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MATTHEW 6:33

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Jesus says in Matthew 6:33, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Although its meaning seems straightforward, this verse is often incorrectly understood and practiced. Thus many people might think that they are doers of the word when they are merely hearers of the word (James 1:22).

Sometimes we think that we have already done what is required of us, and feel good about ourselves for it, just because we agree with what we have heard from God's word. Sometimes we misunderstand a verse as demanding something lower than what it does, and thus we think that we have satisfied its requirements when this is not the case. Or, sometimes when we fail to satisfy even this lower standard, we will just say to ourselves, "That's close enough." The result is that, in all these instances, we are performing far below what God's word actually demands of us, and enjoying far less of the life and power that he has promised us.

In what follows, we will consider some of the ways that people have distorted and disobeyed this verse. Then, we will also consider the correct understanding of this verse as well as some of its implications.

First, there are those who exhibit blatant and unabashed disobedience; they explicitly make wealth their object of pursuit.¹ Of course, this characterizes only unbelievers, and if it characterizes your life, then you are an unbeliever, still headed for everlasting suffering in hell.

Unbelievers are accustomed to doing the very opposite of what God's word commands (v. 32). All of their thinking reflects the fact that they love "Money" and despise God (v. 24). Their typical goal in life is to attain financial riches and security. This often leads to an emphasis on the means to attaining this goal, such as worldly education and business relationships.

We expect this approach to life from unbelievers, but many professing Christians are no better. They would often admonish their children to focus on school work, but they do not demonstrate the same level of urgency when speaking to them about church work. They tell their children to study hard so that they will get good grades, get into good schools and colleges, and eventually get good jobs and salaries. But their agenda is not nearly as specific and ambitious when it comes to their children's theological studies and future in ministry.

¹ By "wealth," we are not necessarily referring to great prosperity, but to food, clothing, money, and material things in general.

This is because the kingdom is not first with them. Whether explicitly or implicitly, whether by instruction or by example, they instill in their children the idea that the highest goal in life is financial security, rather than to know God and to work for his cause. Of course, those who teach this to their children are already practicing the same themselves. This is unacceptable, and unbecoming to those who profess the faith. The problem is so serious that it is to be harshly condemned.

Second, there are those who make seeking the kingdom of God the means to obtaining material things, and wealth is still the end of all their seeking and striving. They take the verse as a teaching or even a promise on how to legitimately obtain material things from God. To them, Jesus is not saying that one should avoid striving for material things, but he is saying that *the way* to obtain them is to seek first the kingdom of God.

This attitude is essentially the same as the first. The difference is that instead of seeking wealth directly and apart from any Christian context, they now convince themselves that they are seeking after material things "the right way" by seeking the kingdom of God in the process.

However, this is a deception, and it contradicts the very point of the passage, which is to direct our attention and our efforts away from seeking material things, and instead to seek the kingdom of God. Jesus does not say, "Seek first the kingdom of God, *so that* you will obtain money and other material things."

Third, there are those who make wealth the means by which they seek and promote the kingdom of God, but they do so in a way that really makes wealth the direct object of their seeking and striving. Claiming that they ultimately have God in mind, they nevertheless center their lives around wealth and other material things, so that if they pay any attention to the kingdom of God at all, it is obviously little more than an afterthought to them.

Some are rather bold about this. I have heard several people assert that although it is true that this verse tells us to seek first the kingdom of God, the best way to seek first the kingdom is to first get as rich as possible! So what if you study, pray, sacrifice, preach, and counsel? A rich person can pay to train up a hundred people like you at one stroke!

According to them, the way to put the kingdom first is *not* to do anything for the kingdom right away, but to have a larger "vision," like getting *really* rich first so that you can make large financial contributions to churches and ministries. This is how their mind works. They are so deceived that they think this is the right thing to do, and they even think that this is what this verse is really teaching, so that they are not embarrassed to freely admit this. From their perspective, those who seek the kingdom of God through sacrifice and discipline, prayer and study, are in fact inferior in vision and in ability.

Of course, this is just an excuse for disobeying the verse. It claims that the best way to obey the verse is by doing exactly the opposite of what it commands. Jesus makes it clear that to seek first the kingdom of God means that we are *not* to seek after wealth and other

material things, the things that the unbelievers consider most important, and the immediate objects of their ambition and desire.

Any interpretation of this verse is false that makes wealth the object of our seeking, and the kingdom as merely the means to wealth, or the excuse to seek after wealth. The verse teaches that the kingdom is the object of our seeking, and other things are at best the means by which we seek the kingdom, and we are never to turn these means into the objects of our seeking. Whether we are speaking of our job, money, education, time, skill, knowledge, and even our family, we are not to place these things higher than the kingdom of God, but we are to use these things as the means and the contexts by which we serve God and seek his kingdom. The kingdom of God is to be the direct object of our attention; any view that compromises this is false.

Yet another way to distort the verse is to represent it as teaching a merely chronological order – that we should *first* seek the kingdom, but *then* seek wealth and other material things. This view might initially appear plausible because of the word "first," but it does not imply that Jesus is telling us to merely make seeking the kingdom the first item on an agenda that contains many other items.

In fact, from the language and the context of the verse, it appears that Jesus is telling us to make seeking the kingdom the "first" and thus the *only* item on our agenda. In verse 33, he does not say, "You must serve God *and then* Money," nor does he say, "You must serve Money *so that* you can serve God." Rather, he has already said in verse 24, "You *cannot* serve *both* God and Money." Therefore, in verse 33, he is saying, "You must serve God *and not* Money *at all*."

The verse reads, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (active); and all these things shall be added to you (passive)." The first part of the verse tells us what we ought to do; on the other hand, the second part of the verse does not tell us some other thing that we also ought to do, but it simply tells us what will happen. The point of the entire passage is to get our attention away from material things in order to actively seek the kingdom of God.

Therefore, by "first," Jesus is not indicating that we should give the kingdom of God mere chronological priority, but that we should actively make it the sole focus of our lives, making everything else subservient to it. In other words, you have not obeyed this verse just because you meditated on a passage of Scripture for two minutes "first" thing in the morning, but then put everything Christian out of your mind for the rest of the day. To seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness would include thinking on his word all day and all night (Psalm 1:2), even while you are doing other things. There are many things competing for your attention throughout the day, and each time you must put the kingdom of God "first"; each time you must let it control your agenda, your thinking, and your behavior.

This does not mean that you must neglect or abandon some of the legitimate things in your life. Scripture teaches that it is your duty to attend to your family, your occupation,

and the practical matters of life that are necessary to sustain a normal lifestyle and to function in human society. But even these legitimate things must be done in the context of seeking the kingdom of God, and one must be prepared to put the kingdom first even at their expense. Often it is because of these "legitimate" things that cause people to neglect the kingdom of God, and all the while they still think that they are seeking first the kingdom, and thus they stop being doers of the word, but hearers only.

In a sermon on the same verse, Warfield writes:

How many think it would be unreasonable in God to put His service before their provision for themselves and family? How many of us who have been able to "risk" ourselves, do not think that we can "risk" our families in God's keeping? How subtle the temptations! But, here our Lord brushes them all away in the calm words, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Is this not a rebuke to our practical atheism?²

What a piercing question! Perhaps we have all been guilty of obeying the verse only to an extent (which is to say that we have been disobeying it); we have so many seemingly legitimate reservations. Of course it is our duty to provide for our families, and sometimes it pains us to see that they must do without certain things because of our service to the kingdom of God. It appears that even those of us who seem to measure up to the verse in many respects still fail when it comes to this point.

If yielding to it means disobeying God's command, then this is ultimately a carnal concern. Jesus does tell us to seek *first* the kingdom, and first means first. As Warfield observes, it is practical atheism to think "that we cannot trust God for our earthly prosperity but must bid Him wait until we make good our earthly fortunes before we can afford to turn to Him."³ Our Lord demands our attention now and not later, and he requires us to serve him continuously and not intermittently; he commands us to put him first every time.⁴

What is our ambition? Is it worldly or spiritual? Is it centered around the kingdom of God or our own little empire? As we have noticed, it is easy to "deceive yourselves" (James 1:22), and to think that you are a doer of this verse when you are only a hearer; it is easy to think that you are doing all that it says when you are falling far short of it. This is why we have spent this time trying to understand this verse better, and to unravel some of its implications for our lives.

² Benjamin B. Warfield, *Faith and Life* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), p. 46.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Of course, this is not an excuse to neglect our duties, for some people neglect both the kingdom and their families.

Matthew Henry comments that obeying this verse means "making religion your business," and to "mind religion as your great and principle concern."⁵ Is this what you are doing? Is this what you are enforcing in your family? Does the way that you spend your money and your time suggest that you are "making religion your business"?

What are you teaching your children? Do you repeatedly tell them to study hard so that they will get good jobs in the future, or do you tell them to focus on developing biblical knowledge and character so that they will please and glorify God? Do you ever tell them to *stop* doing their homework to pray a while, to read a commentary, or to write a theological essay?

Again, we are not suggesting that our children should neglect their school work and other duties, but Jesus does say that we must seek *first* the kingdom, and first means first. We must believe that even the needed things concerning the children's education will be "added to them" if they will seek first the kingdom of God. In any case, there is no excuse for our children to know more about algebra than theology, or to know more about the theories of physics than Paul's message to the Romans.

Some parents have their children's academic career all planned out by the time they enter elementary school, if not way before that, but very few seem to plan out their theological training and character development *in detail*, so that they will become productive citizens of the kingdom of God.

But of course, parenting is not the only aspect of our lives that we need to be concerned about; we are using it only as an example, and as something that might expose our true priorities and concerns. We must examine every aspect of our lives to make sure that we are really seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), p. 1642.