

First Things First
Matthew 6:25-33

“Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you as well.” Jesus was saying, when we put first things first, everything else falls into place. Our first priority has to be building God’s kingdom by living in righteousness. Well, what is the righteousness of the Kingdom of God? True righteousness is to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

So, when Jesus said that if we put first things first, it becomes common sense that we don’t have to worry about the other things. When neighbors love one another, they take care of one another. And when people take care of one another, we don’t have to worry about having enough food or clothes or shelter.

Thanksgiving is a celebration of a time when neighbors took care of one another. When the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, over half of the Pilgrims died that first winter from starvation and disease. When spring came, an Indian from that area took pity on them and taught them how to farm and hunt and fish in this new land. As a result there was more than enough food when the next fall. The Pilgrims invited the Indians to share a meal with them. The Indians didn’t come empty handed. They brought five deer and twelve wild turkeys. So, these neighbors sat down together and shared their food in peace. No Pilgrim ever again starved to death in that colony. Because the Indians and the Pilgrims lived together in righteousness as good neighbors, they didn’t have to worry about what they would eat or drink or wear.

There is a story about a man who had a dream. In his dream, St. Peter came to take him on a tour of heaven and hell. St. Peter asked him which he would prefer to see first. The man said that he would prefer to get the tour of hell over with first. So, St. Peter took him to see hell. To the man’s great surprise, St. Peter led him to a great dining hall. The tables were filled with all kinds of wonderful food. There were people sitting at the tables. They had forks that were ten feet long. As the man watched, he saw people getting food on their forks. But because the forks were so long, they couldn’t get the food to their mouths. So, all those people were sitting there, starving, with all that food.

Then St. Peter took the man to heaven. The scene was almost identical. It also was a large banquet hall with tables filled to overflowing with wonderful food. To the man’s great surprise, the people seated at these tables also had forks that were ten feet long. The only difference was that the people were not trying in vain to eat the food on their own fork. Instead, they were using their forks to feed each other.

In this man’s dream the difference between heaven and hell was simply this: Those in heaven put first things first. They were righteous. They put the needs of their neighbors first. As a result, they had plenty. The people in hell, on the other hand, only cared about themselves and their own needs. So, even though there was plenty, they starved.

It’s not about how much we have. We have plenty of resources. God has provided everything that all of God’s creatures need. The birds of the air have all the food they need. The lilies in the field have all they need to produce bright and beautiful adornment for themselves. If God has provided so generously for birds and plants, surely God has provided even more generously for the children of God.

And the truth is that God has given us everything we need for all human beings to have good lives.

There are nations that have as much or more resources than we do, but who have far lower standards of living than us. There are nations that have less resources than we do, but they have higher standards of living than we do. It's not about the resources. It's about what kind of neighbors we are.

This world can be like heaven. Or it can be like hell. It's up to us. When we choose to live righteous lives and take care of our neighbors and let our neighbors take care of us, we all have plenty. When we are so concerned about taking care of ourselves that we neglect our neighbors, this world becomes a miserable place to live in.

We must never forget that we are all in the same boat. There is a story about a 18th century merchant sailing ship from the days of the large-masted ships. On a long trip several of the sailors became sick. The contagion was spreading rapidly. The captain called in the ship's doctor and asked for his advice. The doctor said, "We will eventually all become sick. A few will die. But most of us will recover." The captain asked if there were any alternatives. The doctor said, "Well, we do have the life boats. We could put the sick in the life boats. That might stop the spread of the disease on the ship. However, those in the life boats, without shelter and proper care, most of them would die." The captain said, "I prefer that choice." So, the sick were loaded into the lifeboats. They were towed behind the ship with a rope. It did stop the spread of the disease, but, just as the doctor predicted, most of the men in the lifeboats died. One night the watchman in the crow's nest suddenly shouted, "Iceberg!" And, sure enough, there was an iceberg dead ahead. Under most circumstances, they could have avoided the iceberg. However, as they tried to turn the ship, because so many of the crew had died on the lifeboats, they were short handed. And because they were short handed, they were not able to trim the sails quickly enough. They struck the iceberg. The ship sank and all hands were lost.

The captain had made a fatal error. He forgot that the officers and crew of a ship can only survive if they take care of one another.

The same is true of communities and nations and the human race. God has provided enough for all of us to have good lives. If we take care of one another, we'll have good lives. If not, we will all go down with the ship.

Next Thursday, when we sit down to our Thanksgiving meal and offer up our Thanksgiving prayer, let me suggest to you that we need to keep in mind our neighbors who don't have enough. As we give thanks for the food, we need to remember that there are forty million Americans who don't have enough food to be healthy. As we give thanks for warm clothes, we need to remember that without thrift stores, many Americans would be dressed in rags. As we give thanks for the homes in which we live, we need to remember the people living on the streets and in the shelters and those who have lost their homes over the past few years. As we give thanks for our health, we need to remember those who are sick and can't afford health care. Let us thank God for our good neighbors. And let us pray that we can be good neighbors.

Put first things first. Love God and love your neighbors. Take care of your neighbors for God's sake. And everything else will take care of itself.

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