

GIVING THE LORD THE FIRST PLACE IN ALL THINGS TO MAINTAIN THE FELLOWSHIP OF LIFE, THE FLOW OF LIFE

BY ED MARKS

The fellowship of the eternal life is the subject of John's first Epistle (1:3, 6-7). This fellowship is the flow of the eternal life within all the believers and is illustrated by the flow of the river of water of life in the New Jerusalem "proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev. 22:1). The fellowship of the Body of Christ is the stream, the flow, of the divine life. In order to enjoy this flow, this fellowship, we must be under God's throne, and we must give the Lord the first place in all things (Col. 1:18). Ezekiel 47:1 shows that this river, this flow of life, comes from the right side of the house. The right side is the preeminent position. This shows that we need to give this inner flow of life, this fellowship of life, the preeminence in our being. We need to realize that the practical Christ, the present Christ, the precious Christ, the real Christ, is His flowing presence. When we have Him flowing within us, we have His precious, practical, present, dear, available, wonderful, and intimate presence. In our Christian life and for our church life, we need to enthrone the Lord in our being, life, and work in order to maintain the fellowship of life, the flow of life, within us.

In Revelation 22:1 and 2 we see the Lamb-God sitting on the throne, the river of fellowship proceeding out of the throne, and the tree of life on the two sides of the river. If we give the Lord the first place in our being, He becomes the shining One within us because God is the light within the Lamb as the lamp (21:23; 22:5). If we give Him the preeminence, He becomes the redeeming One, the Lamb, to us. If we give Him the preeminence, He becomes the reigning One to us, because He is on the throne. If we give Him the first place in all things, He becomes the flowing One as the river of water of life in our being and the supplying One as the tree of life to us. Thus, when we give the Lord the first place in all that we are and do, He becomes the shining One, the redeeming One, the reigning One, the flowing One, and the supplying One within us.

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things Being to Love the Lord with the First Love

To give the Lord the preeminence, the first place, in all things, is to love the Lord with the first love, the best love (2:4), being constrained by His love to regard and take Him as everything in our life (2 Cor. 5:14-15). Many Bible readers think that to love the Lord with the first love means to love the Lord with the love in our initial salvation experience. While it may not be wrong to say that the first love refers to the love that we felt when we were initially saved, this is not an adequate definition of loving the Lord with the first love. To love the Lord with the first love is to give the Lord the first place in all things and to be constrained by His love. When we enthrone the Lord Jesus in the center of our being and are constrained by His love, we regard Him as everything and take Him as everything in our life. When we enthrone the indwelling Christ and take Him as our Head and Lord, we enjoy Him as the inner flow of life, the fellowship of life.

In order to enjoy the Lord as our inner fellowship of life, we daily need to be constrained

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with the love of Christ so that we would no longer live to ourselves but to Him (v. 15). To live to ourselves means that we are under our own control, our own direction, and our own governing for our own aims and goals. To live to the Lord means that we are determined to gain the honor of being well pleasing to Him (v. 9) by being absolutely under His control, direction, and government. Living to the Lord means that we care uniquely for His aims and goals. In other words, to live to the Lord means that we are under His direction and control and that we want to fulfill His requirements, satisfy His desires, and complete what He intends. Romans 14:7-9 says, "None of us lives to himself, and none dies to himself; for whether we live, we live to the Lord, and whether we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore whether we live or we die, we are the Lord's. For Christ died and lived again for this, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living." The purpose of Christ's death and resurrection was that He could be the subjective Lord within us. This is why we call, "Lord Jesus." He is our inward Lord, King, God, Ruler, and Master. He is the ruling throne of grace within us, out of which proceeds the river of water of life. When we take Him during the day as our Head and subject ourselves under His headship, we will enjoy the inner fellowship, the inner flow, of the river of water of life.

Mark 12:30 is a command to love the Lord our God: "You shall love the Lord your God from your whole heart and from your whole soul and from your whole mind and from your whole strength." We need to love the Lord with our whole being, including our physical strength. In *The Overcoming Life*, Watchman Nee writes the following:

I loved M. E. Barber because she was a person who truly loved the Lord with all her heart, all her mind, and all her soul. After she died, I found the following note in her Bible next to the verse "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37): "Lord, I thank You that there is such a commandment." We often think that it is a grievous thing that God has so many commandments. But we should say, "Lord, I thank You that there is such a commandment." (177)

Psalm 73:25 says, "Whom do I have in heaven but You? / And besides You there is nothing I desire on earth." We should be able to say this to the Lord. If we feel we cannot, we should tell the Lord and have a conversation with Him, saying, "Lord Jesus, I want You to be my unique desire, but I have other desires. Forgive me. Operate in me the willing and the working for Your good pleasure. Work in my heart so that besides You there is nothing I desire on earth." Verse 26 goes on to say, "My flesh and my heart fail, / But God is the rock of my heart and my portion forever." Psalm 80 shows that the way to be restored from degradation is to exalt Christ. Verses 17 and 18 say, "Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand, / Upon the son of man whom You have strengthened for Yourself; / Then we will not turn back from You. / Revive us, and we will call upon Your name." The Lord Jesus is the man of God's right hand. He is in the most preeminent position in the universe. The psalmist is exalting Christ so that he will not turn back from the Lord but instead be revived to call upon His name. He concludes by praying, "O Jehovah God of hosts, restore us; / Cause Your face to shine, and we will be saved" (v. 19).

The Beginning of Our Love for the Lord Being a Vision of His Person

The beginning of our love for the Lord in exalting Him to His rightful position in our lives is a vision of His person. Leaving the first love toward the Lord is the source of and main reason for the failure of the church throughout the ages. Nothing but love can keep us in a proper relationship with the Lord (Eph. 3:16-19; 6:24; Rev. 2:4-5; cf. 3:20). Nothing but love can maintain the fellowship of life, the flow of life, within our being. We must have an aspiration to love the Lord more and more until He comes so that our Christian pathway becomes brighter and brighter (Prov. 4:18) and we are being renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4:16). To love Him more, we need more vision of His excellent person. We need the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord (Phil. 3:8). This means

that we need to see His supreme preciousness and supereminence. Then spontaneously we will love Him with the first love.

Matthew 26:6-13 is the story of a woman (Mary) who took an alabaster flask of precious ointment and poured it out on the Lord. This was probably the most costly and valuable thing that she had. When the disciples saw what she did, they said, "Why this waste?" (v. 8). They did not have the revelation of the Lord's excellency, His supreme preciousness, and His supereminence. The Lord said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? She has done a noble deed to Me" (v. 10). He concluded by saying, "Truly I say to you, Wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what this woman has done shall also be told as a memorial of her" (v. 13). The story of the gospel is that the Lord loved us; this is for our salvation. The story of Mary is that she loved the Lord; this is for our consecration. The footnote on verse 8 in the Recovery Version is precious:

The disciples considered Mary's love offering to the Lord a waste. Throughout the past twenty centuries thousands of precious lives, heart treasures, high positions, and golden futures have been "wasted" upon the Lord Jesus. To those who love Him in such a way He is altogether lovely and worthy of their offering. What they have poured upon Him is not a waste but a fragrant testimony of His sweetness. (Lee, note 1)

The parallel portion of this story in John 12:3 says that when Mary took this ointment and anointed the Lord with it, "the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment." Our homes and the churches need to be filled with the fragrance of the ointment of our loving the Lord Jesus with the first love and of our pouring out our love for Him. When people come among us, they should be impressed with the fact that we have a chief characteristic—we love the Lord Jesus.

When we pray, based on Ephesians 3:16 through 19, "Father, strengthen me according to the riches of Your glory with power through Your Spirit into my inner man, that Christ may make His home in my heart," the result is that we are rooted and grounded in love. This means that we are in love with the Lord. We love Him, and we love the brothers and sisters with His love. We can then actually know experientially and subjectively the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ and be filled unto all the fullness, the full expression, of God. Ephesians 6:24 says, "Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in incorruptibility." When we love the Lord Jesus according to all the incorruptible things revealed in the book of Ephesians (such as the church as the Body of Christ, as the new man, as the wife of Christ, as the warrior of God, etc.), then grace is with us. Grace is God in Christ as the Spirit for our enjoyment. We can enjoy the Lord by loving the Lord.

Doing the First Works

To love the Lord with the first love, to give Him the first place in all things, in order to maintain the fellowship of life within us, is to repent and do the first works. The first works are works that issue from the first love. Revelation 2:4 says, "I have one thing against you, that you have left your first love." Verse 5 goes on to say, "Remember therefore where you have fallen from and repent and do the first works; but if not, I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent." Verse 4, of course, is very powerful. We should not leave our first love for the Lord. We should not stop giving Christ the preeminence, regarding Him and taking Him as everything in our life, but we also have to do the first works, works that are a "labor of love" (1 Thes. 1:3), works that do not issue out of a legal, outward duty but out of our fresh, inward love for the Lord. These verses show that it was possible for the saints to be meeting as the church in Ephesus outwardly yet not have the testimony of Jesus, the lampstand, inwardly. If they continued to not have the first love and to not do the first works, works that issue from the first love, then the Lord warned that He would come to them to remove the lampstand from them. The lampstand is the testimony of Jesus as the reality

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of the Triune God. The golden element of the lampstand signifies the Father in His divine nature, the form of the lampstand signifies the Son as the image of the invisible God, and the seven lamps are the sevenfold intensified Spirit of God for the ultimate expression of the Triune God. We should be warned by Revelation 2:4 and 5. It would be a terrible thing to meet as the church in a locality outwardly yet have no lampstand there in actuality. Without the first love and the first works, all we will have will be empty assemblies with no living reality of the Triune God. When we stand at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), the Lord will not judge the greatness or volume of our work. He is going to judge how much of what we did was out of our love for Him. Only those works that are motivated by love are the gold, silver, and precious stones (1 Cor. 3:12).

The Lord's Banner over Us Being Love

In Song of Songs the Lord's banner over us is love (2:4), which means that love is our motto and that everything we do is based on our love for the Lord. A motto is a brief statement used to express a principle, a goal, or an ideal. Love is the principle of our Christian life and church life. God's love in Christ is a banner over us, displaying, exhibiting, that we who are loved by God are more than conquerors (Rom. 8:31-39). We have a life of love that conquers everything if we live in His love. The seeker in Song of Songs was "sick with love," meaning that she was joyous in the Lord's love to the point of exhaustion (S.S. 2:5). Everything we do should be based on our love for the Lord. To be lovesick is to be so deeply affected by love that we are unable to act normally. Today we should be the "crazy lovers" of the Lord Jesus. This is to exalt the Lord in all things so that we may maintain the fellowship of life, the flow of life.

Having a Personal, Affectionate, Private, and Spiritual Relationship with the Lord

To give the Lord the first place in all things is to have a personal, affectionate, private, and spiritual relationship with Him (1:1-4). How is our relationship with the Lord, and what kind of relationship do we have with Him? If we really love the Lord, we will have many things to say to Him in our personal time with Him, and He will have many things to say to us. In Song of Songs, when the loving seeker of the Lord says to Him, "Draw me," it is personal. When she says, "Kiss me," it is affectionate. When she says, "The king brought me into his chambers," it is private and spiritual, because the King's chambers, His dwelling place, is our regenerated spirit (Eph. 2:22). We all need to take heed to the Lord's word in Matthew 6:6, where He charged us to pray in a proper relationship with the Father: "When you pray, enter into your private room, and shut your door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you." The words *private* and *secret* are very meaningful. Our hearts need to be the good earth where Christ as the seed of life can grow in an unhindered way (13:23). For this we need a "root system" in our relationship with the Lord, a relationship in which He can be deeply rooted in our hearts through our having much private and secret contact with Him. Then we will have much secret experience and enjoyment of Christ so that He can be deeply rooted within us and grow within us for the growth and building up of the Body of Christ.

Living a Day-by-day Life of Morning Revival

To give the Lord the first place in all things in order to maintain the inner flow of life for our fellowship with Him, we must live a day-by-day life of morning revival. Psalm 110:3 says, "Your people will offer themselves willingly / In the day of Your warfare, / In the splendor of their consecration. / Your young men will be to You / Like the dew from the womb of the dawn." First, we need to offer ourselves willingly to the Lord so that our consecration will be a splendor in His sight. On the basis of such a consecration, we will desire to have a private time of fellowship with the Lord every morning. When we have time with the Lord in the morning, we get into the womb of the dawn,

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and something fresh and new of Christ is conceived in our being. We are mingled with the fresh Christ, and we actually become the divine and mystical dew to water and refresh Him with the very Christ whom we have enjoyed and received. We need to have a change in our view to realize that our time with the Lord in the morning is first for His satisfaction and enjoyment and then for our supply and strengthening.

Isaiah 50:4 is a verse concerning Christ in His human living: “The Lord Jehovah has given me / The tongue of the instructed, / That I should know how to sustain the weary with a word. / He awakens me morning by morning; / He awakens my ear / To hear as an instructed one.” In His human living Christ was awakened by the Father morning by morning so that He could hear the Father’s word as an instructed One and so that He could have the tongue of an instructed One to sustain all the weary ones with the Father’s word. Mark 1 tells us that the whole city was gathered at the door where the Lord was staying, but this did not prevent Him from spending personal time with the Father: “Rising very early in the morning, while it was still night, He went out and went away to a deserted place, and there He prayed” (v. 35). He prayed in order to fellowship with God so that He could be one with God in His desire and preference for His gospel service. We need to learn from the Lord’s pattern to spend private and personal time in fellowship with God to be infused with Him for the carrying out of His will.

Living a Day-by-day Life of Separation unto God to Bless the Children of God with God in His Divine Trinity

To give Christ the first place in all things in order to maintain the fellowship of life is to live a day-by-day life of consecration, becoming today’s Nazarites, who are fully separated unto God and saturated with God in order to bless the children of God by dispensing God in His Divine Trinity into them (Num. 6:1-9, 22-27). By reading the footnotes in the Recovery Version on Numbers 6:1-9, we see that a Nazarite was separated unto God from four things: from natural affection, from earthly pleasure, from rebellion, and from death. Instead of natural affection, we should know people according to the Spirit as the new creation (2 Cor. 5:16-17). Instead of earthly pleasure, we should enjoy the Lord as our pleasure, entertainment, and amusement for our heavenly joy. Instead of rebellion, we should live and have our being under the headship of Christ. Instead of touching death and spreading death, we should be filled with the life-giving Spirit to be swallowed up by life. When we have this kind of fourfold separation and consecration, we can bless the children of God by dispensing God in His Divine Trinity into them. “Jehovah bless you and keep you” can be ascribed to the Father; “Jehovah make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you” can be ascribed to the Son; and “Jehovah lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace” can be ascribed to the Spirit (Num. 6:24-26). This is equal to the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit being with us all (2 Cor. 13:14). We should be fully separated unto God to bless people with the Triune God.

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Living a Life of Prayer

Giving the Lord the first place in all things to maintain the fellowship of life, the inner flow of life, is to live a life of prayer (1 Tim. 2:1; 2 Tim. 1:3; 1 Thes. 5:17). Samuel said to the people of Israel, “Far be it from me that I would sin against Jehovah by ceasing to pray for you” (1 Sam. 12:23). This verse shows that not to pray is a sin. We need a private time to pray first to be infused with God, and then out of that infusion we can pray for our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Even the Lord Jesus sought more time to pray privately to the Father. After the Lord fed the five thousand in Matthew 14, He did not bask in His accomplishment, but He compelled the disciples to get into a boat and go to the other side of the sea (v. 22). Verse 23 says, “After He sent the crowds away, He went up to the mountain privately to pray. And when night fell, He was there alone.” This

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shows that He had a personal, private time of prayer to the Father. Witness Lee, in footnote 1 on this verse in the Recovery Version, says,

Standing in the position of man (4:4), the heavenly King, as the beloved Son of the Father (3:17), needed to pray privately to His Father who was in the heavens, that He might be one with the Father and have the Father with Him in whatever He did on earth for the establishing of the kingdom of the heavens. He did this not in the deserted place but on the mountain, leaving all the people, even His disciples, that He might be alone to contact the Father.

If the Lord Jesus needed more time to pray privately to the Father, how much more do we need more time with Him! We need to pray, "Lord, give me more time to pray privately to You so that I can be one with You for the building up of Your Body and for the coming of Your kingdom in its manifestation."

Daniel was a man of prayer. The chief ministers of the kingdom of Persia were jealous of Daniel, so they conspired together to destroy him. They deceived King Darius by influencing him to sign an edict that said that anyone who would make a petition within the next thirty days to any god or man besides the king would be cast into the lions' den (Dan. 6:7-9). Verse 10 says, "Now when Daniel came to know that the writing had been signed, he went to his house (in his upper room he had windows open toward Jerusalem) and three times daily he knelt on his knees and prayed and gave thanks before his God, because he had always done so previously." Daniel would not let his habitual prayer time be interrupted by anything; even at the threat of his life, he still prayed and gave thanks to God three times a day. Notice that verse 10 says, "He gave thanks before his God." This indicates that a person of prayer is a thankful person and that our prayers should always be filled with thanks to God.

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Loving, Treasuring, and Musing On God's Word

To give the Lord the first place in all things, loving Him with the first love, in order to maintain the fellowship of life is to love, treasure, and muse on God's word (Psa. 119:11, 14-15, 23, 48, 72, 78, 97, 99, 111, 113, 119, 127, 140, 147-148, 159, 162-163, 165, 167). These verses from Psalm 119 encourage and inspire us to love God's word. Verse 11 says, "In my heart I have treasured up Your word / That I might not sin against You." Verses 14 and 15 say, "I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies / As much as in all riches. / I will muse upon Your precepts / And regard Your ways." There is wonderful footnote on the word *muse* in the Recovery Version:

Rich in meaning, the Hebrew word for *muse* (often translated *meditate* in the KJV) implies to worship, to converse with oneself, and to speak aloud. To muse on the word is to taste and enjoy it through careful considering. Prayer, speaking to oneself, and praising the Lord may also be included in musing on the word. To muse on the word of God is to enjoy His word as His breath (2 Tim. 3:16) and thus to be infused with God, to breathe God in, and to receive spiritual nourishment. (Lee, Psa. 119:15, note 1)

In verse 48 the psalmist says, "I will lift up my hand to Your commandments, which I love; / And I will muse upon Your statutes." To lift up our hand to God's commandments, His word, means to receive His word warmly, to welcome it, and to say Amen to it. This should be our attitude toward the word of God. Verse 140 should be the motto of all of those who serve the Lord: "Your word is very pure, / And Your servant loves it." Verse 165 says, "There is great peace for those who love Your law, / And there is no occasion of stumbling for them." *Law* here is a synonym for God's word. We need to love God's word. Then there will be great peace for us, and we will be kept from stumbling. Verse 167 says, "My soul has kept Your testimonies [Your word], / And I love them very much."

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Being Governed by the Direct, Firsthand Presence of the Lord

To give the Lord the first place in all things in order to maintain our fellowship with Him and with our fellow believers is to be governed by the direct, firsthand presence of the Lord. Second Corinthians 2:10 tells us that Paul forgave a brother “in the person of Christ.” The Greek word for *person* can also be translated as “face” or “presence.” This Greek word means “the part around the eyes,” which conveys the index of a person’s feelings and thoughts. Paul forgave this brother in such an intimate contact with the Lord, showing that he was a person who was governed by the direct, firsthand presence of the Lord. Moses was a person similar to Paul. Exodus 33:11 says, “Jehovah would speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his companion.” We also need such an intimate relationship with the Lord. Because Moses was a man according to God’s heart and close to God’s heart, he had God’s presence to a full extent. When the Lord charged Moses to lead His people through the wilderness, Moses said to Him, “If Your presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here” (v. 15). In verse 14 the Lord said to Moses, “My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest.” Subjectively speaking, the Lord’s presence within us is His smile. We Christians always have Him dwelling within us, but do we have His smile—His direct, firsthand presence? In verse 16 Moses told the Lord, “Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, are distinct from all the other people who are on the face of the earth?” The presence of the Lord is what makes us distinct and different from all the other people on the face of the earth.

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Loving the Church in the Church-loving Christ

To give the Lord the first place in all things, which is to love Him with the first love, is to love the church in the church-loving Christ. Ephesians 5:25 says that “Christ...loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” In 2 Corinthians 12:15 Paul says that he would gladly spend and be utterly spent on behalf of the souls of the Corinthians. Even if they loved him less, he would love them more. To spend is to spend our material possessions; to be utterly spent is to spend ourselves, our being. We need to spend our material possessions and even our soul-life, our being, on the ones for whom we are caring in the Lord. It did not matter to Paul whether or not the Corinthians loved him. He was still going to spend his whole being on them because he loved the church in the church-loving Christ. Paul experienced Christ’s love for the church and was constrained by that love to love the church unconditionally.

“We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers... In this we know love, that He laid down His life on our behalf, and we ought to lay down our lives on behalf of the brothers” (1 John 3:14, 16). In footnote 1 on 1 John 3:14 in the Recovery Version, Witness Lee says,

Death is of the devil, God’s enemy, Satan, signified by the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which brings death; life is of God, the source of life, signified by the tree of life, which issues in life (Gen. 2:9, 16-17). Death and life are not only of two sources, Satan and God; they are also two essences, two elements, and two spheres. To pass out of death into life is to pass out of the source, the essence, the element, and the sphere of death into the source, the essence, the element, and the sphere of life. This took place in us at our regeneration. We know this, i.e., have the inner consciousness of it, because we love the brothers. Love (the love of God) toward the brothers is strong evidence of this. Faith in the Lord is the way for us to pass out of death into life; love toward the brothers is the evidence that we have passed out of death into life. To have faith is to receive the eternal life; to love is to live by the eternal life and express it.

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world a life of God as love and [He] is now our life that we may live the same life of love in this world and be the same as He is.”

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Loving the Ministry That Builds up the Church

The genuine New Testament ministry builds up the Lord’s church, comprising all of the regenerated children of God. The work of the ministry is the building up of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12). We need to love the ministry that builds up the church. The Greek word for *fellowship* in 1 John 1:3

indicates a putting away of private interests and a joining with others for a certain common purpose. Hence, to have fellowship with the apostles, to be in the fellowship of the apostles, and to have fellowship with the Triune God in the apostles’ fellowship is to put aside our private interests and join with the apostles and the Triune God for the carrying out of God’s purpose (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 3, note 3)

In his speaking of the churches of Macedonia and their sacrificial giving to meet the need of God’s people, Paul says, “They gave themselves first to the Lord, and to us through the will of God” (2 Cor. 8:5). This means that they consecrated themselves to the Lord, and then they gave themselves to the apostles so that they could be one with the apostles in whatever the apostles as the Lord’s servants were doing to carry out their ministry for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Living and Walking by the Spirit to Serve by the Spirit and to Minister the Spirit

To give the Lord the first place in all things for the maintenance of the inner flow of life is to have our being by the Spirit and to do everything by the Spirit. Judges 9:9 indicates that those who live and walk by the Spirit (typified by the olive oil) honor God and that those who minister and dispense the Spirit honor man. Galatians 5:25 says, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” Philippians 3:3 says, “We are the circumcision, the ones who serve by the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh.” Second Corinthians 3:3 says, “You are being manifested that you are a letter of Christ ministered by us, inscribed not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tablets of stone but in tablets of hearts of flesh.” Paul’s ministry was not one of merely expounding God’s word but one of inscribing people’s hearts with the divine and mystical ink of the Spirit of the living God so that these people would become living letters of Christ. Others would then be able to read Christ and know Christ in the being of these living letters. Paul went on to say that God made him and his co-workers “ministers of a new covenant, ministers not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (v. 6).

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Taking Him as the Fountain of Living Waters

To give the Lord the first place in all things is to take Him as the fountain of living waters, as the source of our enjoyment. “God’s intention in His economy is to be the fountain, the source, of living waters to dispense Himself into His chosen people for their satisfaction and enjoyment...to produce the church, God’s counterpart, as God’s increase, God’s enlargement, to be God’s fullness for His expression” (Lee, Recovery Version, Jer. 2:13, note 1). In John 4 the Lord told the Samaritan woman something marvelous about Himself as the living water; He said, “The water that I will give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into eternal life” (v. 14). This short saying unveils the desire of the Triune God’s heart and His function to accomplish that desire. God the Father is the fountain; Christ the Son is the spring; and God the Spirit

PAUL’S MINISTRY WAS NOT ONE OF MERELY EXPOUNDING GOD’S WORD BUT ONE OF INSCRIBING PEOPLE’S HEARTS WITH THE DIVINE AND MYSTICAL INK OF THE SPIRIT OF THE LIVING GOD SO THAT THESE PEOPLE WOULD BECOME LIVING LETTERS OF CHRIST.

is the river flowing in us, through us, and out of us “into eternal life.” The word *into* in Greek, as used in this context, bears the spiritual significance of “to become,” and the totality of the eternal life is the New Jerusalem (having the light of life, the tree of life, and the river of water of life). Thus, it is by the flowing Triune God (by the fellowship of the Triune God as the eternal life) that He and we are incorporated together to become the totality of the eternal life—the New Jerusalem.

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Eating Him as the Tree of Life

To give the Lord the first place in all things is to eat Him daily as our spiritual food, as the tree of life. Eating Christ as the tree of life, enjoying Him as our life supply, should be the primary matter in the church life. This statement should govern the span of our entire life until we meet the Lord. God’s enemy always wants to make other things the primary matter to us, but the primary matter is to eat Christ as our spiritual food. The Lord said, “He who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me” (6:57), and Jeremiah says, “Your words were found and I ate them (Jer. 15:16). The way to eat Christ as the tree of life is to eat His words; Matthew 4:4 says, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out through the mouth of God.” The way to eat the Lord’s words is by means of all prayer (Eph. 6:17-18). The words of the Bible become our nourishment of life when we take it as our prayer book.

Knowing the Evil Condition of the Wicked

If we are going to give the Lord the first place in all things, we need to know the evil condition of the wicked. Isaiah 57:20 says, “The wicked are like the tossed sea, / For it cannot be calm, / And its waters toss up mire and mud.” The footnote by Witness Lee on this verse in the Recovery Version is very powerful and convicting: “The evil condition of the wicked is that they do not come to the Lord to eat and enjoy the Lord (cf. 55:1-2). They do many things, but they do not come to contact the Lord, to take Him, to receive Him, to taste Him, and to enjoy Him. In the sight of God nothing is more evil than this” (Note 1). It is possible for us to serve the Lord diligently in many ways, but if we are not enjoying the Lord, we are in an evil condition. This matches Jeremiah 2:13, which says that God’s people had committed two evils: they had forsaken Him as the fountain of living waters and hewn out for themselves broken cisterns, which could hold no water. In other words, God’s people first forsook Him as the source of their enjoyment, and then they attempted to make things with their human labor and self-effort that would be substitutes for God as their enjoyment. These substitutes are nothing but idols, broken cisterns. We must realize that it is evil not to enjoy the Lord. We must give Him the first place in all things, loving Him with the first love, in order to maintain our enjoyment of Him.

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Taking Him as Our Centrality and Universality

We can give the Lord the first place in all things by taking Him as our centrality—our holding center—and our universality—our everything. We need to take Him as the center, the content, and the circumference of our personal universe. Colossians 1:17 tells us that the entire physical universe coheres in Christ. This means that the entire universe subsists together in Christ as its holding center. The galaxies, the stars, the planets, and all the things in the universe cohere in Him. He is the holding factor, the “glue,” that holds the universe together. In the same way, He is the holding factor that holds our personal universe together. Everything in our personal universe coheres in Him, and He must have the first place in our personal universe (v. 18). If we do not take Christ as the center of our life and our being, our entire personal universe will descend into chaos, and everything in our life will be “out of orbit.” *Hymns*, #863 (a hymn for meeting) speaks of Christ being the centrality and universality of both our daily life and meeting life:

IN JEREMIAH 2:13
GOD’S PEOPLE FIRST
FORSOOK HIM AS
THE SOURCE OF THEIR
ENJOYMENT, AND THEN
THEY ATTEMPTED TO
MAKE THINGS WITH
THEIR HUMAN LABOR
AND SELF-EFFORT
THAT WOULD BE
SUBSTITUTES FOR GOD
AS THEIR ENJOYMENT.

WE SHOULD ALL ASPIRE
TO OBTAIN A WELL-
PLEASING TESTIMONY
IN HIS SIGHT. WHEN
WE PLEASE HIM IN ALL
THINGS, WE ARE
MAINTAINING THE
FELLOWSHIP OF LIFE
WITHIN US, AND WE
WILL BE REWARDED
AT THE JUDGMENT
SEAT OF CHRIST.

- 1 In daily walk and in our meetings too,
Christ is the center, Christ is everything;
'Tis not for form nor doctrine good and true,
But 'tis for Christ alone we're gathering.
- 2 Christ is the way and Christ the light of life,
In Him we walk and by Him we are led;
Christ is the living water and the food;
Of Him we drink and we with Him are fed.
- 3 Christ is the truth, 'tis Him we testify,
Christ is the life, 'tis Him we minister;
Christ is the Lord, 'tis Him we magnify,
Christ is the Head, and we exalt Him here.
- 4 Christ is the All in all to God and man—
With Him both we and God are satisfied;
Christ, the reality within the Church—
By Him are life and numbers multiplied.
- 5 By all the hymns and prayers we offer here,
Christ the reality we would express;
All the activities in fellowship—
Christ thus in operation manifest.
- 6 'Tis in His Name we meet, in Spirit act,
With nothing in our mind to formalize;
'Tis by His pow'r we pray, in unction praise,
And with Himself in spirit exercise.
- 7 All things forgetting, cleaving unto Christ,
Applying Him until maturity;
Let us count everything but loss for Him,
For Him, our All in all, eternally.

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Determining to Gain the Honor of Being Well Pleasing to Him

To give the Lord the first place in all things is to aspire and determine to gain the honor of pleasing Him in all things. In 2 Corinthians 5:9 Paul says, "We are determined...to gain the honor of being well pleasing to Him." Colossians 1:10 says that we should "walk worthily of the Lord to please Him in all things, bearing fruit in every good work and growing by the full knowledge of God." *Bearing fruit* "refers to living Christ, growing Christ, expressing Christ, and propagating Christ in every respect. This is the real essence of every Christian good work" (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 10, note 3). The full knowledge of God is "not knowledge in letters in the mind but the living knowledge of God in spirit, by means of which we grow in life" (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 10, note 4). Hebrews 11:5 and 6 speak of Enoch, who walked with God and was translated, that is, raptured. Verse 5 is particularly precious because it says, "Before his translation he obtained the testimony that he had been well pleasing to God." We should all have the aspiration that before we meet the Lord, we would obtain such a testimony in His sight. When we please Him in all things, we are maintaining the fellowship of life, the flow of life, within us, and we will be rewarded at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10).

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Having a Clear Sky with God's Throne above It

In Ezekiel 1 there is a picture of four living creatures, who signify the coordinated Body of Christ, the corporate Christ, as God's corporate expression (vv. 5-14). Above these living creatures there is a clear sky like awesome crystal with God's sapphire throne

above it (vv. 22, 26). This is a picture of our highest spiritual experience. Our “sky” is connected to our conscience. To have a clear sky like awesome crystal means that there is absolutely nothing between us and the Lord because we have a blood-washed and blood-purified conscience (Acts 24:16; 2 Tim. 1:3; Heb. 9:14; 10:22). The sapphire throne above the clear sky means that we have given the Lord the preeminence, the first place in all things, and that we are filled with the heavenly situation, atmosphere, and condition of His ruling presence—allowing Him to rule and reign within us. For us to have a clear sky with God’s sapphire throne above it means that we are living in the reality of the kingdom of God. A footnote to Ezekiel 1:26 in the Recovery Version says,

The Lord’s presence is always with His throne. The Lord’s throne is both in the third heaven and in our spirit (Rev. 4:2-3; Heb. 4:16 and note 1; cf. 2 Tim. 4:22). The throne above the crystal clear expanse indicates that whenever we have a “clear sky” in our Christian life and in our church life, we will be under the ruling of the throne. The highest point in our spiritual experience is having a clear sky with a throne above it. To reach this point means that in everything we allow God to have the preeminence and are completely submissive to God’s authority and administration. The throne is not only for God to reign over us but also for God to accomplish His eternal purpose. If we have the throne in our spiritual life, God will not only rule over us but will also fulfill His purpose in us, with us, and through us. (Lee, note 1)

It is by having a clear sky with God’s throne above it that we are able to maintain the fellowship of life, the flow of life, within us.

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Holding Him as the Head

Colossians 2:19 says that we should be “holding the Head, out from whom all the Body, being richly supplied and knit together by means of the joints and sinews, grows with the growth of God.” To hold Christ as the Head is to stay intimately connected to Him and to give Him the first place in all things. It is to enthrone Him as the Ruler and Decider of everything in our life. We should be those who ask for the counsel of the Lord in every detail of our Christian life and work. In Joshua 9 the children of Israel were deceived by the Gibeonites. Verse 14 gives the reason: “They did not ask for the counsel of Jehovah.” At the beginning of Paul’s Christian life, at his conversion, he asked the Lord two questions: “Who are You, Lord?” and “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:8, 10). Blessed are those who ask these questions. The first question indicates that Paul’s entire life was a quest to know Christ as the Lord of his life (Phil. 3:10). The second question indicates a total dependence on Christ as the Lord of his work. We need to ask for the Lord’s counsel, especially in our labor for Him. It is a sin to disobey the Lord’s counsel. It is also a sin to act without the Lord’s counsel. When we are working together with the Lord under His headship, the following hymn by M. E. Barber becomes very meaningful to us:

- 1 Not where we elect to go,
But where Jesus leads the way,
There the living waters flow,
There our darkness turns to day.
- 2 Not our self-appointed task
Will the Lord’s approval win,
But the work we did not ask,
Finished humbly, just for Him.
- 3 Not the prayer we long to plead
When we bend before the Throne,
But the touching deeper need
Of the Spirit’s wordless groan.

WE SHOULD
ASK FOR THE
COUNSEL OF THE
LORD IN EVERY DETAIL
OF OUR CHRISTIAN
LIFE AND WORK.
IT IS A SIN TO
DISOBEY THE LORD’S
COUNSEL. IT IS
ALSO A SIN TO ACT
WITHOUT THE
LORD’S COUNSEL.

TO GIVE THE LORD
THE FIRST PLACE
IN ALL THINGS IS
TO BE HIS CAPTIVE.
THIS MEANS THAT
WE ARE DOMINATED,
GOVERNED, DIRECTED,
LED, AND MOVED
BY OUR MINGLED
SPIRIT, CARING
FOR THE REST IN
OUR SPIRIT.

- 4 Not the gift we proudly lay
On His altar will He heed
If our hearts have said Him, "Nay,"
When He whispered, "I have need."
- 5 Thus we die, and dying live
In the heavenlies with the Lord;
Thus we serve, and pray, and give,
Christ Himself our great Reward. (*Hymns*, #907)

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Being His Captive

To give the Lord the first place in all things is to be His captive. This means that we are dominated, governed, directed, led, and moved by our mingled spirit, caring for the rest in our spirit (2 Cor. 2:12-14). The divine Spirit dwells in our human spirit (Rom. 8:16), and these two spirits are mingled and joined together as one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17). Paul's goal in writing 1 Corinthians was to cause the Corinthians (who were fleshy, fleshly, and soulish) to aspire to the growth in life so that they might become spiritual men (2:14-15; 3:1, 3). Second Corinthians may be considered an autobiography of Paul, who was a person in the spirit. Chapter 2 tells us that when Paul came to Troas, a door was open to him in the Lord for the preaching of the gospel (v. 12). If we acted according to our natural concept, we would have entered through such a door, since it was opened in the Lord and it was for the gospel of Christ. But Paul was not governed by this outwardly good circumstance; he was dominated, governed, directed, led, and moved by his spirit. In verses 13 and 14 he says, "I had no rest in my spirit, for I did not find Titus my brother; but taking leave of them, I went forth into Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in the Christ and manifests the savor of the knowledge of Him through us in every place." For Paul to be led in triumph in the Christ was for him to be led as a captive in a triumphal procession, just as a conquering Roman general in battle led his captives back to Rome in a triumphal procession. Christ was Paul's conquering General, and Paul, who was once Christ's enemy, was now Christ's captive. The practicality of his being Christ's captive was his taking care of the rest in his spirit. He was governed and ruled by the Lord as the Spirit in his spirit, not by his outward circumstances. What the Lord needs today are not so-called spiritual giants but little captives. We all should pray, "Lord, make me Your captive. Never let me win. Defeat me all the time." Our move as captives of Christ in our ministry for Him is God's celebration of Christ's victory over His enemies.

Giving the Lord the First Place in All Things by Enthroning Him with Our Praises

To give the Lord the first place in all things is to enthrone Him with our praises. Praise is the highest work carried out by God's children. Psalm 22:3 says, "You are holy, You who sit enthroned / Upon the praises of Israel." In Psalm 119:164 the psalmist says, "Seven times a day I praise You / For Your righteous ordinances." In Psalm 34:1 David says, "I will bless Jehovah at all times; / His praise will continually be in my mouth." God sits enthroned upon the praises of His people. Declaring, "Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!" is a prevailing way in which we can give Him the first place in all things to maintain the fellowship of life, the flow of life, within us. 

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