

## Ten Suggestions for Putting the Lord First

A New Year's sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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We all know the Lord's instruction to "Seek first the kingdom of God" and that then all the other things we worry about will be provided (Matthew 6:33). But do we really believe it? And if we believe it, HOW do we believe it? How do we understand it?

Surely the Lord is not going to just give us whatever we need apart from any effort of our own! In fact we know that would be wrong. We also know that the food and clothing He referred to represent spiritual things, namely the good of love and the truth of faith. So what does it mean to stop worrying about these things and "seek first the kingdom of God"?

Well, first of all, the teaching is not mainly about getting what we need, it's about worrying over it. Of course the Old King James translation says that we should "take no thought," but it really means no *anxious* thought. The fact is, we do have to plan ahead, we do have to make an effort, and we do have to be prudent about it. But we shouldn't worry. It's like the idea that money is the root of all evil: no, it's not. Money is simply a medium of exchange; it's the *love* of money that's the root of all evil because it's a symptom of greed (1 Timothy 6:10), which is a symptom of the love of self, which is the *real* root of all evil. And like the love of money the thing about worry is that most often it is *self-centered*: "How am *\*I\** going to be sure that *\*I\** get the things that *\*I\** need? (Oh, sure, we often worry about other people, too, but not so much about people who have nothing to do with *\*us\**.)

So the Lord says, "Don't worry, but seek first the kingdom of God and His justice." Now seeking is a positive, constructive activity, and we also know that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of uses (i.e., usefulness), so in seeking His kingdom we will be seeking to be useful. But again, what does this mean? Often when we use that word, useful, we're thinking of things that we can do physically for others: providing a material product, gift or service, for example, or contributing financially where there is some physical need. And these can be important expressions of usefulness, but they are not the uses themselves that constitute the kingdom of God. Rather we know that "the kingdom of God" is an expression in the Word that refers specifically to the whole system of His teaching in the truths of His Word, and that justice (often translated righteousness) refers specifically to the goodness of His love. These are not material things and they cannot be gained by doing any physical work – not that good works aren't important; they ARE, but in the Lord's sight *only as expressions of a good understanding and a good will*.

In fact we taught repeatedly in the heavenly doctrine that it is essential for our spiritual lives that what is natural with us be subordinated to the spiritual, that is, made subservient to it. Both the natural and spiritual components of our lives are necessary, but they must work in harmony, with the natural subject to the spiritual.

So how can we, in this New Year, honestly and earnestly "seek first this spiritual kingdom"?

As it happens the Lord Himself has given us a lot of great suggestions. One is, "Go to church." Seriously. I know this is preaching to the choir, but when you leave here today you will find on the podium in the lobby a list of 15 direct teachings from the Writings explaining why regular habits of external worship are important. Please take a copy and post it on your 'fridge at home.

Another (2) is, "Read the Word." Most of us have heard this all our lives, and no doubt we all believe we should do it, but do we have the self-discipline to take it seriously? Some do, and these people are to be admired! But many of us need prodding. The trouble is, if someone *else* prods we tend to feel resentful. On the other hand a general principle of life is that work expands to fill the time allowed for it. So if there's no deadline for getting it done the rest of what we do will crowd it out. This is one reason why joining a group or committing to a schedule makes us much more likely to read than we would be otherwise.

We can also learn from others about the Lord and His kingdom, but we should remember that no one (including any minister or teacher) has the authority, power and insight that He has provided directly in His Word. For one thing it is all written in correspondences, so even when we don't fully understand it, when we read it reverently we expose ourselves to the influence of whole societies of angels who are associated with it through the spiritual sense. In any case, why would we rely on second-hand information when we can go straight to the Source and get it from the Lord directly? This applies especially to the heavenly doctrine, which may be challenging to read at first, but the more you read the easier it gets as you grow accustomed to the language and concepts you find there.

Of course the guidance of a minister, a teacher, or a study group can and should help, but the real authority is the Word itself, so what we learn from others always needs to be checked against the Word, anyway (see SS 53-56 & DP #154 ff).

Another suggestion that follows from this is (3) to discuss what you learn (Deut. 6:7). The perfection of any whole is built on variety *and also on the numbers of people affected* (HH #57, 71). This includes our own understanding as we process the perspectives of others on the things we are learning, and it affirms the value of our own contribution to others as they hear what we think and feel about it. In fact the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Writings all teach the importance of discussing what we learn about the Lord.

Still another suggestion (4) is, "Teach Sunday School." Of course this isn't for everybody; you have to be good with children. But think about it: there's nothing quite like teaching for learning, because you need to know your stuff. And you can pick an age group that works for you.

Although Sunday School is never mentioned in the Word, teaching children certainly is mentioned as an important spiritual use. And one of the benefits aside from what we learn in preparation, or even what the children learn about the lesson as such, is that they see the example of adults taking this material seriously. So the children are provided with "remains" of truth AND good, creating an impression that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Along similar lines (5), you can share your faith with other adults outside the church. This doesn't have to be a BIG DEAL: just drop little bits of information in the course of ordinary conversations that invite further inquiry in case they strike a chord. You can say something like, "Wow, that's interesting! In our church we believe that...." and then go on to talk about the Lord, or the symbolism in the Bible, providence, marriage in heaven, or ... whatever fits the conversation. As Swedenborg himself said, "What is the use of knowing [something] unless it be communicated? What is it, but like collecting and storing up riches in a casket, and only looking at them occasionally and counting them over, without any intention of applying them to use? *Spiritual avarice is nothing else*" (ISB #18).

In fact the spiritual sense of the parable of the sheep and the goats urges this responsibility on us and warns us of the consequences if we don't do it. Remember, the sheep, who were blessed with eternal life, gave food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, took in the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and attended those in prison. The goats, who went to hell, did not (Matt. 25:31-46). That's the literal sense. But in the spiritual sense it's all about sharing the goods and truths of the Word with those who are in need and receptive. And we'll never know who needs them and who is receptive unless we "test the waters" by volunteering some information.

Our sixth suggestion is "Turn off the television." Now obviously the Lord didn't say this, but He does teach the critical importance of quiet reflection about what is going on in our lives, not to mention the other five things we've just listed. So we need to make time for this. And while television has its uses, it CAN become a time waster. Think about it. We all need our recreational hours: the Writings call these "diversions of charity." But how much is enough, and how much is too much, diverting our attention from more important things? Only you can say, but you can't make this determination unless you think about it and apply some discipline.

Our seventh suggestion is that old favorite, "Repent." Seriously. This is taught on almost every page of the Writings and the teachings are crystal clear that we can't really appreciate spiritual goodness or truth if we are actively involved in some disorder. So even if we search diligently for the kingdom of God – within or outside of us – we won't find it as long as we have not addressed the evils in our lives, or if we do find it we won't recognize it. On the other hand, when we make a practice of shunning our evils as sins against God, we declare ourselves ready to receive new information and affection without our normal selfish bias, and then when we do receive it we will recognize it for what it is and feel a huge sense of relief and comfort in it.

Number eight in today's list of suggestions is to do something nice for someone every day, preferably in secret and definitely without thought of reward. While it's true that the reward of heaven is the delight we feel in being useful, that's not the *reason* we should do it. The reason is to make life better for others, and so a simple test of our motives can be to notice whether we are looking for the reward of acknowledgement or the just the happiness of the person being blessed. "Love," we read, "consists in this, that its own is another's; to feel another's joy as joy in oneself, this is to love. But to feel one's [own] joy in another and not the other's joy in oneself, this is not to love, for [this] is loving one's self" (DLW #47).

Does this mean we can't want to know that someone has received our gifts? Of course not! We need to know. But we don't need to be thanked. It's ALL thanks to the Lord.

Our ninth suggestion as we "seek *first* the kingdom of God" is to give some of your stuff away. This is especially hard for some of us who like to save things for future use. But giving it away is not the same as throwing it away, because in giving it away you give someone else who may need it the opportunity to use it right away, so this is a real, concrete gesture of unselfishness. If you don't know people personally who can use your stuff there are plenty of charities and even websites where you can post things "for free" while you reduce the clutter of your own space. But the point is, no matter how much we give away out of our very comfortable lives it is likely to be a very small amount compared to what the Lord taught in the Gospels: for example, when He said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25), or "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's

life for his friends" (John 15:13), or "Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me" (Mark 10:21).

Of course all these passages have symbolic meaning, too, but the force of the message is the same in the spiritual sense: there's no real commitment to the Lord without a real sacrifice of what we claim as our own, for the sake of others and the spiritual life.

And now, for number 10, as crass as it may sound, it needs to be said that if you are seeking *first* the kingdom of God you will put your money where your mouth is. No, you don't have to give your money to the church (although that would be nice), but you do have to prioritize the items in your budget so that you are investing a meaningful portion in things that promote spiritual love and wisdom – either in yourself or others. Again, as we said earlier, money is not good or bad, it is only a medium of exchange; but exchange for WHAT? That's the question: a newer, fancier car? – a bigger, better TV? – a home away from home? There's nothing wrong with any of these things, but if they take priority over the things affecting our *spiritual* life we're simply not sincere about honoring this commandment.

So what does priority mean? And what are these "things" affecting spiritual life? Again, this is entirely up to you to decide. But you must decide. Some of your money might be set aside for regular holidays or spiritual retreats, but note that simply basking in luxury doesn't count. This is not your annual family vacation. For this you'll need to provide ample time for serious reading and reflection, prayer, discussion, or maybe even some particular study in the Word. Again, some of your income might be dedicated to social or even political causes that specifically address the soul-destroying influences of evil and falsity in the world. Some of it might be given to support advertising, publication, lectures, or seminars to make the truths of the New Church more widely known, but whatever it is these gifts should be given with a real recognition that *the money is not really ours in the first place*, that everything we have is a gift from the Lord, and that this portion, whatever it might be, is one way of acknowledging that fact.

To sum up, the ten things listed in this sermon are simply ideas and teachings to get you thinking. Some are direct commandments, some are just possibilities. Even if you only picked three of the ten and really determined to practice those three you would be, as the Lord said, "not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34), and in your seeking for it you would be find it.

But we can't resist one final, bonus point, and that is to thank the Lord every day for something, if not everything, that He provides for us. This simple act of being thankful – despite whatever hurts or challenges we may face – demonstrates the humility and openness we need in order to receive even more (see AC #5957 & DLW #335). And in the end this posture of gratitude, in prayer and in life generally, opens the door to fulfillment of the prophecy in Jeremiah, where the Lord said, "...you will seek Me and find Me, *when you search for Me with all your heart*" (Jer. 29:11, 13).

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew* 6:24-34  
Children's talk on seeking *first* the kingdom of God  
*Jeremiah* 29:1-14 and *Apocalypse Explained* #409:7

# APPENDIX

## 15 Reasons Why You Should Attend Church Services Regularly

from the Heavenly Doctrines

1. If you have an internal state of worship you will need and seek opportunities to express that affection in external forms of worship [AC 1618].
2. If you don't have an internal state of worship external forms of worship can stimulate this in you [AC 1618].
3. External worship helps you maintain a sphere of holiness so that internals can flow in [AC 1618].
4. Important knowledge and insight are brought to your attention in worship services [AC 1618].
5. The Lord Himself leads and teaches by means of the Word, and doctrine *and preaching* from the Word [DP 154].
6. The Lord **requires** external worship of you, not for His sake but for your sakes, because the humility in worship is necessary to receive good from Him [AC 5957].
7. One of the signs of charity is participation in external worship [Ch. 173, 177].
8. What is said of heaven applies to the church on earth [AC 10131], and so affirmative participation in the primary use of the church prepares you for heaven.

9. Your affirmative attendance at worship services is an encouragement to others who in any way identify with or relate to you [HH 205-206].
10. Just as the happiness of heaven grows with an increase of the numbers of angels, so the happiness of worship grows with an increase of people who attend – “and each individual is so to speak a focal point of all” [AC 549].
11. Just as the perfection of heaven grows with an increase of the numbers of angels [HH 56] so the perfection of the worship grows with an increase of people who attend.
12. Just as the perfection of heaven grows with the variety of people who enter [HH 71] so the perfection of worship grows with the variety of people who attend.
13. Just as angels wish to communicate their own blessedness and happiness to others [AC 2872, 10723], so it is blessedness and happiness for church members to do this in worship. You don't come just to benefit yourself but to benefit others [HH 268, 556].
14. It is a law of Providence that you should not be compelled by external means to believe and love the things of religion but that you *should* compel *yourself* to do so [DP 129].
15. One of the signs that sins are forgiven is a feeling of pleasure in worshiping God for His sake [NJHD 167], i.e., not just for what you can get out of it.