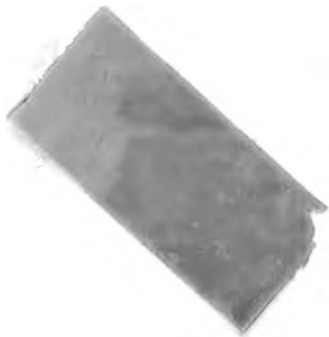


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outside. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." It was Christianity without Christ.

I wish that I could give you the substance and spirit of a sermon I once heard of a black man of the South preach on this text: "Behold I stand at the door and knock." Every sentence had broken grammar, but good religion in bad grammar is very much better than bad religion in good grammar, and we cared very little for his grammar while we listened to his fervent thought and earnest appeal. "There are two sides to this subject," he said, "first the outside, and, second, the inside. Firstly, Jesus is on the outside knocking, and you are on the inside holding the door with your hand on the bolt. He knocks, you hold. There is coming a time when you will be on the outside and Jesus on the inside and while you knock, he will hold. Open the door, brethren, and let him in; that he may open the door then and let you in, for unless he enters your heart and sups with you here, you will not be prepared to enter his heaven and sup with him there."

The cure for half-heartedness is the presence and fellowship of Jesus Christ. The church is his. Let him administer through the Holy Spirit its affairs. By his presence every evil will be cast out, all disorder will be cured, and the glory of heaven will have begun.—Rev. A. C. Dixon, D. D.

FIRST THINGS FIRST.

J. ROSS STEVENSON.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God.—Matt. vi: 33

I wish to speak to you to-night upon the importance of putting first things first, or of placing the emphasis where it rightly belongs. The meaning of a sentence is often determined by the place of emphasis. Exact truth may be written only to be perverted by a wrong stress of voice, and the meaning of life will be determined not only by what we put into it and by what we leave out of it, but by what we emphasize. First things must be put first. The primary must come before the secondary. The subordinate must make way for the supreme.

I once heard an able preacher speaking of "the malignance of a false perspective." He spoke of little things, good enough in their places, but which become evils when brought to the front and unduly enlarged. Most of us have seen the effects produced by an ill-adjusted camera, when the right focus has not been produced,—perhaps the picture of a beautiful little child with the feet as large as the whole body, a monstrosity! But if the angels in heaven could see some of the pictures which we take of life, it would no doubt occasion a great deal of celestial merriment, if it were not so unspeakably sad. A small coin, a little piece of lace held up to obscure the whole field of one's vision! A small insignificant purpose may so engage the attention as to defeat the great and worthy aims in life. It was once customary to build observatories in the heart of the city, but now that is no longer done. They are erected in the country on some high eminence where the atmosphere is clear and quiet, and the scientific observer "can draw the thing as he sees it, for the God of things as they are." And if

you and I are to see this world in its proper light, if we are to relate it to the whole universe of God, we must get upon some high eminence, where we shall not be deceived by things brought near, and the atmosphere through which we look will be clarified and made pure and sweet by the sunlight of God's love.

I. According to the perfect ideal, this vision of Jesus Christ, who stood in the proper position, because of his relation to God and to eternity, to judge things aright, according to his estimate, what are the things that are of supreme worth, the things which we must not neglect, for, if we do so, it will be at our eternal peril? He has given an answer in different ways. You remember his word to Martha, who was so anxious about her household cares that she had not time to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn his word,—how he told her that only one thing was needful and that Mary had chosen that good part which could never be taken away from her. In other words, to listen to Jesus, to receive his truth, to stand in personal relations to him, to submit to his direction, is of greater importance than any anxious thought about our daily task, important as that task may be in its place. You remember again what he said to the rich young ruler when he inquired what he must do to inherit eternal life. How much he had to commend him! His education, his social position, his morality, and yet all that had little value as compared with that one thing which he lacked—a heart fully surrendered to God. There was the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the wise having oil in their vessels. It is a lesson to show us that we should have reserve of character so that we shall be prepared for sudden emergencies, even that greatest and important emergency, when the Lord himself shall come.

But our Lord's most specific word on this topic is, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all things else will be added unto you." By the kingdom of God we mean the supremacy of his rule in all departments of life. We seek that kingdom first when we strive to enter into it, when we strive to conduct ourselves as good citizens, when always subjecting our wills to the will of the Lord, and as Christians endeavoring to extend that kingdom throughout the world. That kingdom represents what the church practically stands for, since the kingdom of God is simply the church of God at work in the world. Hence it would not be perverting these words to say, "Seek identification with the Church of Christ, seek those things for which the Church of God stands in the world."

II. It is true that membership in the Church does not necessarily mean that the man or woman puts first things first. That is what it ought to mean, because our membership pledges us as loyal to Christ and his kingdom, and the Church stands for our being right and doing right.

III. Then membership in the kingdom of Christ relates us not only to the present life but to the life that is to come. It means life that is centered on Christ, life that makes life supreme. The Christo-centric life is the only life that moves in a true orbit and reflects the glory of the other world. And yet there are a good many people even in these days who would reverse the order which Jesus has given, and read his message something like this: "Seek ye first the kingdom and all things else will be subtracted from you." This is a mistaken and perverted view of life that comes from an evil eye that fills the body with darkness and makes one choose the worst while flattering himself that he will also receive the best. I believe it was Galileo who said that the better is the enemy of the best; and there are many things which are good in their way that become sources of evil because they are put in place of the best.

IV. A great deal of inability to believe and indisposition to put forth the efforts required by religion is due to over-occupation with other things. When Professor Pritchard of Oxford was once asked if it was not the tendency of scientific thinking to unsettle religious faith and devotion, he replied, "It is pre-occupation of mind rather

than science that is, and always has been, the prolific parent of skepticism and religious indifference." And then he went on to ask, "Are not the pre-occupations of high positions, of ambition, of literature, of money getting and money spending, of conceit, of sensual habits and even of idleness, at least as unfriendly to the hearty acceptance of Christian revelation as are the pre-occupations of scientific pursuits?" This witness is true. A great many men of strong minds flatter themselves that they do investigate religion and have not been able to accept it when as a matter of fact they have been neglecting it for other pursuits and have never given it any continued thought or attention.

In his book, "The Education of the Heart," Dr. Watkinson calls attention to the culture that is being given to the soul and conscience of man, while the heart which ought to be the center of his being is often the most contemptible part, because its culture is so woefully neglected. By way of illustration he alludes to that beautiful flower, the poinsetta, in which the leaves close to the bud take on such a rich color that they are often mistaken for the blossom itself, which is, however, a very insignificant thing. And so men cultivate their secondary powers to a brilliant hue while the heart is shamefully neglected and appears miserably small. As Ruskin has said, "Taste is not only the index of morality, it is the only morality." The first and foremost question that can be addressed to any of us, and the most searching one is: "What do you like? Tell me what you like and I will tell you what you are." Alas for us if we do not like the best, if we do not put heart into what is eternal and of enduring worth. You remember the Old Testament king who became so absorbed in this, that, and the other thing, that he neglected his chief duty, and his only excuse was, "As thy servant was busy here and there he was gone." And shall we permit ourselves to become so interested, so absorbed, so busy in pleasure, in toil, in the ambitions of life, that we have no place for Jesus Christ?

On the other hand, you cannot find a Christian who makes Jesus King, who puts his kingdom first, and his rule over life as supreme, who is not happy and useful, a blessing to society, and being used of God in his day and his generation.

I have read somewhere that on one occasion Jenny Lind was invited by the king of her country to sing in the royal palace at a festival, but it was to be held on the Sabbath, and her conscience would not allow her to sing at any such public gatherings on the Lord's Day. She refused to come. The king came in person and pleaded with her, and her only response was: "There is a higher King, your majesty. I owe my first allegiance to him." She put Christ first and made him the real king of her life. And if there are any of you here this evening who have not thus enthroned him, even though you may have as much to commend you as the rich young ruler did who came to his Lord, if you have not yet enthroned him, you lack one thing, which is the supreme thing, the all-important thing, as you consider this world and your life as related to God and eternity. Would that you might hear the Master speak to you to-night through this message that I have tried to give in his name, teaching you that no matter what your aims are, without Christ your life is incomplete, unsymmetrical, disfigured, a ruin; but with him life is harmonized, well ordered, under complete control, and crowned with glory and with honor.—Rev. J. Ross Stevenson, D. D., New York.