

VII. The Christian Life in Biblical Perspective
Seven Essentials of an Effective Christian Life
Responding Faithfully – “First Things First”

Revelation 2:1-7

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November 8, 2009 – Morning Sermon

I want to invite you back for tonight’s service. We are studying the book of Daniel. How do you live in an increasingly pagan culture? Two men in the Bible teach us about this, Joseph and Daniel. That is why I have been preaching through Daniel. The second reason why I’m preaching through Daniel is because Daniel is the key to the book of Revelation. These two books give us the understanding of where history is headed and how it will be consummated. Tonight we will look at Daniel 3, titled A Feast to Remember. Please join us tonight at 6pm and I look forward to being with you.

Let’s look at our text for this study. It is the Word of God. It’s the Truth. Revelation 2:1-7 says, *1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 “‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had **at first**. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did **at first**. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’*

The grass withers and the flower fades. This is the Word of God. It abides forever. By His grace and mercy may it be preached for you.

I have to confess something to begin with. There were many fears in my life when God called me ten years ago to Briarwood that I had to bring before the Lord and ask Him that the love of Christ would drive out those fears in my life. One of them was the wonderful testimony of the stewardship of this church and the annual stewardship season which I was not used to. I have come to love this moment every year personally. I love it pastorally because I know what it can be for you. I love it personally because it allows me to go to a time of inventory as I work through the issue of His tithe and my offerings and I have the opportunity to work through my life as a steward.

Two weeks ago in our study of the seven essentials we were looking at the sixth essential which is the effective Christian sees their life as a life trust. The one thing that we are called to be as stewards is to be faithful and that of course fits right in to what our deacons have called this season of stewardship which is Responding Faithfully to the Lord. It was in the context of stewardship that someone gave me what I would like to give to you in this study. It is something very simple. I’m a simple man so I make no apologies for that. The simplicity of it in the context of stewardship, not simply finances, was very helpful to me. So I want to share it with you now.

It was “Harry you need to be F.I.T. as a Christian.” Then they laid out F.I.T. F stands for faithful. I stand for intentional. T stands for teachable. Then they worked it backwards for me. You need to be teachable so you know what to be intentional about and you need to be intentional so that you can be faithful. Then they worked it the other way. To be faithful I need to be intentional and to be intentional I need to be teachable. This is F.I.T. To be faithful, intentional and teachable I need to learn from God’s Word what is foundational. What is fundamental? What is crucial?

The Bible loves to use the word “first.” I want to put in my life first things first. It is so easy to put the wrong things first. It’s even easier to put secondary things first. What are the first things in my life that would make me effective? A couple of weeks ago I ended a study of being a steward and responding faithfully by encouraging you with this phrase; the effective Christian is someone who learns to do the right things, at the right time, in the right way, for the right reasons. The effective Christian is one who learns to do the right thing which is the principle of effectiveness. To do it at the right time is the principle of efficiency. To do it in the right way is the principle of excellence. To do it for the right reasons is the principle of exaltation of God and encouragement of others.

Now learning to do the right things and being effective you need to swim upstream with me because most of us have not been developed that way. Most of us have not been developed to put first things first. We have been developed to put as many things as possible first. We have been taught the principle of efficiency. We love multi-tasking. We love to spin as many plates as possible because we think in there is happiness. In fact, we get a real rush out of being so important that we are so busy that we don’t have room for anything else in our life. What does it mean to be effective?

There was a professor in college who was teaching a lesson that has really helped me and I’d like to share it with you. Some of you have heard this before. This man was teaching a principle on putting first things first. So he started by taking a jar out and putting it on a table in front of his classroom. He said to the class, “This jar represents your life” and in that jar he had these big rocks all the way up to the top. He had two more rocks sitting outside the jar and he said, “See how the jar is full” and the class looked at it and without thinking too much said, “Yeah, it’s full.” He said, “No, it’s not” and he shook the jar. When he shook the jar the big rocks settled down and he was able to squeeze one more rock in but he still couldn’t get the second one in. He said, “Now it’s full” and the class said, “Yeah you fooled us but now it’s full.” The teacher said, “No, it’s not” and he pulled out a jar of sand. He poured the sand in the jar of rocks and the sand filled up in between the rocks all the way up to the top. The teacher said, “Now, it’s full, right?” Now the class had caught on because they knew he had another jar underneath the table. What was in the other jar? It was water. So he poured in the jar of water into the jar of rocks and sand and it filled to the top and he said, “Now, what lesson did you learn today?” Immediately the class answered, “We learned there’s always room to squeeze in a little bit more into life. He said, “Yes that is a lesson and that’s called the principle of efficiency but that’s not the lesson I want you to know today. My lesson for you today is that big rocks have to go in first because you can’t squeeze big rocks in.”

The big rocks go in first. I have 24 hours in every day. I have 7 days every week. What are the big rocks in my life? What are the first things in my life that I need to put in first that give me the happiness, holiness and joy of the Christian life? What would God

tell me they are in His Word, or what would Jesus point me to, or what would the Holy Spirit give me a passion for? Where would I be directed putting first things first? What are the big rocks? I'm about to get into trouble with this next statement. My wife is a big rock in my life. Please put that in context if you would. Obviously you know what I mean. My relationship with my wife is not to be squeezed in. I'd be more than happy to squeeze her but my relationship isn't to be squeezed in. That is something that is a first thing. What are the first things in our life?

This text in Revelation tells us one of the greatest churches in the New Testament had gone astray. He commends them. He said, "You test your teachers, you have patience, you have perseverance and you have all this but I have this against you. You have left your first love. I want you to get back to your first love and the way I want you to do this is to remember to connect to the past without living in it, then repent, turn from your sins that have taken you away to other (secondary) loves, instead of the first Love and then recover the first things to get back to your first Love.

Here are the first things. Jesus said, "I am the First and the Last." The Bible says, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God." Paul said, "I delivered to you those things that are of first importance." So if there are some things of first importance then there are some things of secondary importance. It's not that they are not important but they are not of first importance. God would You allow me to get the first things first? I can be efficient and not be effective but the first thing I need to be is effective. One guy said it this way, "I can be the fastest ladder climber in the world but if I don't get the ladder against the right wall it doesn't do any good." We can be efficient in life but if we're doing the wrong things in life it is of no profit at all. So what does it mean to get first things first in our life? That is really where I want to go in this study. It certainly affects our finances but it's bigger than that and more than that. If we're teachable what would it mean to be intentional? What would it mean to be directed? What does it mean to plan my life for Christ and live my plan in Christ for His glory? I am made in the image of God. A man plans his way and God directs his step. How can I put the first in place?

I read a book by Mark DeMoss on this subject. He talked about how his dad taught him on this. I went back and thought about what my dad taught me and how he would say, "Son, take care of business in your life." What does it mean for me to take care of business in my life? What does it mean to get the right things in place in my life? I prayed through it and there are five things I want to share with you in this study that are first things and where our first love in Christ would be manifested.

The first one is the first appointment of every day is to be made with the Lord. So make the first appointment every day with the Lord. I know these are big rocks and many of us want to be a lot more sophisticated than this but I believe these basics are crucial. I don't think it is our lack of ingenuity that keeps us from being influential for Christ but I think it's our loss of the basics in the Christian life. So the first one is before I have an appointment with anybody in this world, my first appointment needs to be with the Lord. I need to meet with Him. I need to listen to Him from His Word and I need to speak to Him in prayer. The Campus Outreach Ministry in Charlotte called it TAWG meaning Time Alone With God. You can call it devotions. The Puritans used to call it morning exercise. It may be called quiet time in your language but meet God first. Go to that alarm clock and say to it, "tomorrow morning you will not be an alarm clock because you will be an opportunity clock. I am going to set you and when you ring it will be my

opportunity to meet God personally.” You may want to use TableTalk. Right now I am using one of the Puritan preacher’s devotionals called Morning Exercises. I have found it so rich. You may want to use Our Daily Bread. You may just want to read systematically through your Bible. But I want to meet God in His Word and then take that Word and pray right back to my God about all the issues of my life. I want to make my business to meet God before I meet anyone about business the rest of that day.

Not only should God be the first appointment of everyday but secondly, the first day of every week is the Lord’s, the Lord’s Day. I want to make the Lord’s Day, the Lord’s Day. I want that day to be given to the Lord. God gave me that day as a gift. He didn’t give the Lord’s hour or the Lord’s hour and fifteen minutes. He didn’t give 10:55am to 12:10pm. He gave the Lord’s Day. So God, You tell me in Your Word that if I honor Your day, I turn it over to You, I rest from my labor, I gather with Your people in morning and evening sacrifices of praise, I gather my family together then You will make the other six days more productive, I’ll ride the heights of the earth, You’ll raise me up, You tell me all of these things if I delight in Your day. So I not only want the first appointment of every day to be with the Lord but also the first day of every week to be the Lord’s. That’s your gift. I did not make man for the Sabbath, I made the Sabbath for man.

Thirdly, I want to make the first relationship of all relationships, the Lord’s relationships. What do you mean by that Harry? I have many relationships in life and you have them and I treasure them and I am grateful for them but there are some relationships in Christ that I call first relationships. Here’s how I define them. Any relationship that I have that is covered by a covenant vow before God is a first relationship in my life. What’s the first one? It’s my marriage. I took vows before God that I would never separate from my wife that I will love her, cherish her for better or worse and I get the better, she gets the worse, through good days and bad days, through rich days and poor days in which that is my priority relationship. Any relationship with anybody else including my children is based upon the one with my wife first. Secondly, my children and the baptism of them where I took vows to raise them in the nurture and admonish of the Lord, I want to fulfill those vows. The world will not direct me in how to raise my children. God’s Word will direct me in how to raise my children and by God’s grace I want to raise them in and for the Lord. Thirdly, there are the vows of membership in the body of Christ. So I will not play drive-by church. I will not put the people of God in a secondary relationship and I will not put my relationship with Him among His people as a secondary relationship. I want to fulfill my covenant vows as a member of the body of Christ. Of course there are other vows that I have taken for instance in a job to my employer and all of those are crucial but my relationships that are under the umbrella of the sacred vows before God, by God’s grace I want to make them first relationships, not secondary.

So the first appointment of everyday I want to meet with the Lord. The first day of every week is the Lord’s Day. I want to present it to the Lord as well as benefit from it as the Lord has given it to me. The first relationships of all relationships are the Lord’s relationships that are covered by vows before the Lord.

Fourthly, the first dime of every dollar is the Lord’s. In fact, what does the Lord call the tithe? Isn’t the tithe absolutely marvelous? It is percentage giving. It is proportionate giving. If I make \$100 what’s my tithe? It is \$10. If I make \$1,000 what’s

my tithe? It's \$100. So it's very simple. It's proportionate and percentage. It is also purpose because what is the tithe? It is the first fruits. The Apostle Paul said, "The first fruits you have set aside to bring on the first day of the week." Malachi says, "Bring it into the storehouse." It is an act of worship whereby I am telling God all that I have You have given me and with this I tell You that not only do I acknowledge that all I have You have given me but all that I am is Yours and I give the tithe to tell You that. I haven't started giving yet because the tithe is Yours but I do want to respond faithfully. I want to be a good steward. I want to bring it to the storehouse. I want to use it as an act of worship. I want to see it being multiplied and used to save sinners, to disciple people and be used for mercy, plant churches and revitalize churches. This tithe is a first fruit of what You have given me and now I want to watch it bear fruit as it is being used. I want to make a statement of purpose in worship that my God is my trust, not my money.

Yes, this is difficult times but perhaps those become the greatest opportunity times when it king of clears the air in days of adversity as to who has me and who has given me what I have and how I can honor Him. In days of prosperity it gets a little cloudy. I get to thinking about this fund and this opportunity and this enterprise yet in days of adversity the air gets cleared pretty quickly. Lord, You are my hope. My trust is in You. So God, Your tithe I'll bring and offerings I will pray through and gladly bring. So I bring the first dime of every dollar and I promise you that God has made a promise. It is the only thing that He says to test Him in. Test Me in this and see what I will do. Do not rob the Lord of His tithe and offerings. Test Him and watch what He will do.

Then number five is that I want the first love of every love to be the Lord. I want the first appointment of every date to be with the Lord. I want the first day of every week to be the Lord's Day. I want the first relationship of all relationships to be those Lord relationships of covenant vows. I want the first dime of every dollar to be brought in worship and praise of God and I want the first love of every love to be the Lord in my life. I love my wife but not added to the Lord, it is because I love the Lord. I love my children but not added to the Lord. It's because I love the Lord. I love you because I love the Lord and because the Lord has loved me. Love divines all love excelling that first love of all loves, the love of Christ constrains me and the love of Christ compels me. God, allow me to make Your love my first love in all of my life. That's why I want to meet with You in the morning. That's why I want to delight in You on Your day. That's why the vows I have taken before You in relationships are important. That's why I don't want to rob You of Your tithe. I want to honor You because I want to love You. Please allow these five first to be put into my life.

Here are three takeaways as I bring this study to a conclusion. The first one is putting first things first clarifies life, brings effectiveness to life and brings sanity to life. Most of us are way too busy and the reason we are so busy is that we can't say "no." The reason we can't say "no" is that we don't have a big enough "yes." When you get big "yesses" then you can say "no." A person may say to me, "Harry I want to meet with you at 5:30 in the morning." I would say, "No, I already have an appointment." They say, "Who is that with?" I say, "God, but I will be glad to meet with you at 6am. God is at 5:30am." I have a bigger "yes" to say "no." This brings clarity to life and the ability to frame up my life. To say "no" to something you have to have a bigger "yes" to the right things. If I know the value of the Lord's Day then I know what to say about my activities on the Lord's Day.

Let me give you a story on this. This last week I did some leadership training for one of our church plants in the Presbytery. I went through what it means to be a leader and how you get there. Then one of the young men raised his hand and asked a very insightful question. He said, "Pastor, I love what you have said and I want to do what you've said but I go to work, I have bills, my family, my children and this and that so can you give me one practical suggestion to help me with clarity?" I said, "Sure, it's the Lord's Day. The Lord's Day helps me get the compass back. It brings me back to focus. It's a day of renewal and fellowship. It is a day I can sort through things. I can get back to the basics of things. I know you were looking for some other great insight but the Lord's Day is God's gift to you on this." Then I gave them the story and the quote from William Wilberforce.

We sure needed a William Wilberforce in America. If we had had a William Wilberforce we probably wouldn't have had a Civil War. But they almost didn't get William Wilberforce either because before his 28 year effort to eradicate England of chattel slavery, he was offered a position of power and prestige in the English Government. It was something that was highly flattering to a young man. He turned it down. Why? It was offered on Thursday. What? In between Thursday and Monday was the Lord's Day. This is what William Wilberforce said, "Blessed be the Lord God for the Day of Resurrection, the Lord's Day. It is the day of rest and religious occupation whereby earthly things are put in their proper place and size. I am restored and refreshed." Praise the Lord for the Lord's Day where the earthly things are put into proper place and size. He came back and turned down the position. 28 years was the eradication of slavery 28 years later.

He got away from his ambition and power and what he was going to have because the Lord's Day was a first day and with that first day he got things back in place. When I give that tithe to the Lord I get things in order. When I meet the Lord as the first appointment I get things in order for my life. First things bring clarity, effectiveness and sanity to life.

The second takeaway is keeping first things first is an unending challenge in life. There is Satan out there who wants me to make wrong things first things. He says, "If you can't get wrong things first things make tertiary things first things or secondary things first things. Make good things first things so that you don't do the best things." Satan is constantly doing that. I not only have Satan out there but I have the world that's working with him, and the media, the music of the world, the programs of the world and I have the old man within me that continues to want to make the wrong things first things.

Recently I was in the home of some of the young couples in our church. Young couples have young children. Their young children were playing. At the home I walked around into the play room of the family hosting the gathering. The child of the home was in there with all the other children that were visiting. That child had every single toy he owned grasped to his chest saying, "Mine, mine, mine." Have you ever noticed you never have to teach kids to take you only have to teach them how to give. Interestingly, the child was clutching his toys so hard he couldn't even play with them. The toys were useless. I have to constantly ask God to get me where the first things are first in my life and He is my life.

The third takeaway is to establish first things first in life it is only possible when Christ is your life. We are going to go to prayer in just a moment and I am going to give

two prayers. One will be for those of us who know Christ to take the moment to get first things first. First things first are not the games of this world or the toys of this age. I want to get the first things first but it starts by first giving yourself to Christ. That's where it starts. You might have thought, "Oh my this is their stewardship season" but this is a great day for you because the real question is not what we give to the Lord but have we received the Lord's gift to us? It is His Son, Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and that He is our life. He is not only first place in our life but He is our life.

The real question is not, does God have my tithe? The real question is, does God have me? Then He has my first hour of every day, the first day of every week and the first relationships because my first Love is giving me direction in my life. When He is my life I have a reason for life and a purpose of life of joy in the Lord. When Christ is my life it's much more important for Christ to see me faithful and thankful than for the world to see me as successful, powerful and prosperous. Oh Lord, You have first place. Let's pray. Spend a few moments in silent prayer.

Prayer:

That first love that sets up a first appointment, the first day of every week, the first relationships and the first dime of every dollar is the first place of Christ. If you have never come to Jesus would you this day say, "Jesus, I come and trust You as my Lord and Savior. You are not only first place in my life, You are my life." Make that your prayer today. Those who know You, we spend a few moments not only on this issue of Your tithe and our commitment to be faithful, intentional and teachable, but in all of these areas of our life give us the ability to do inventory, to embrace and to do the right things in the right way, in the right time, for the right reasons. We love You who first loved us. Dear Jesus, who surrendered to the Father's will that we might have life, I surrender all and more importantly I surrender, in Jesus' Name, Amen.