

The Highest Good

*Basic Scripture resources. Psalm 119:97-106;
Matthew 5:14-16, 6:1-6, 25-34;
1 Corinthians 10:31*

Thus far in this series of lessons we have been concerned with *knowing* God's will as He has revealed it to us in His law. It has been taken for granted that we are also concerned with *doing* God's will once we learn what it is. In other words, it is assumed that we truly want to obey God's commands.

This leads us to a question that philosophers and thinkers have discussed for literally thousands of years, namely, the question of the "highest good." It can be simply stated in this way: what is the most important thing we can hope to accomplish by our acts and deeds?

When we stop to think about it, we realize that our actions are usually not ends in themselves but are the means of bringing about some higher end or goal. For instance, when we take a drink of water, we don't do it just for the sake of drinking. We do it for a purpose, probably to quench our thirst. But even the quenching of thirst is a means to a still higher goal, such as the relief of discomfort or the attaining of a feeling of well-being. Some may say that even the attaining of well-being is but a means of being freed from creaturely distractions so that we can concentrate on the highest goal of all, namely, bringing honor and glory to God.

This sequence of purposes applies to *everything* we do, whether we are conscious of it or not. We have a purpose we are trying to achieve, a goal we are striving to attain. By our actions, including our acts of obedience to God's law, we are working to bring about a particular end result.

In this final chapter we want to do two things. First, we want to learn from the Word of God just what the most important goal in life *should* be. We will do this through a study of Matthew 6:33. Second, we want honestly to examine our own lives to see if we are indeed seeking that goal.

I. The Goal

In Matthew 6:33 Jesus says, "But seek first His kingdom, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you" (NAS). In the first part of this statement our Lord tells us specifically what the highest good or ultimate goal in life should be: the kingdom of God.

When Jesus says, "Seek first," He is informing us that one's life should and does have an ultimate purpose. Without doubt many people have no conscious goal in life. They are aimless and drifting; they have "dropped out." But Jesus says "Seek!" He commands us to have a target, to be looking for something, to be trying to accomplish something. This forces us to stop and ask ourselves, "Just what *do* I want out of life? Just what am I trying to achieve?"

Someone may try to avoid the question by saying, "I'm interested in lots of things. I don't have just one goal." But he does have one supreme goal, even if he has not stopped to think about it. For each person there will always be one thing that is more important than all others -- one thing that means more to him than anything else -- one thing that he wants above all else.

To many people (perhaps the majority), the most important thing in life is personal pleasure or happiness. Their rule is to do only those things that bring about a freedom from pain (including anxiety) and a sense of well-being. As one rock singer said, "I believe . . . that the whole idea down here on the old earth is to be happy. . . . You have to enjoy what time you have, and it's fairly short." A literary critic put it this way: "To me, pleasure and my own personal happiness . . . are all I deem worth a hoot. . . . I have all that I can do to look out for my own happiness and welfare."

Happiness, of course, is relative. One person may not be satisfied until he has achieved considerable fame and fortune. Another may be satisfied with comparatively little. A "man-on-the-street" interviewer asked various people to state their concept of the "good life." One person replied,

To me the good life would simply be a steady job and the income to the point where I'm not wealthy, just comfortable. I have a few meager material things I'd want, such as a good record player and records things dealing with music. Dependable transportation. And a place to live. And a little money on the side in case I need it, a couple of hundred, even, in the bank, and enough spare change in my pocket so that when I run out of cigarettes I can buy them with the money I got in my pocket.

The ultimate parody of such materialistic hedonism comes from a Burger Chef place mat. It pictures a quarter-pound hamburger sandwich and describes its contents: juicy beef, cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, onions, and scrumptious sauce. Then it concludes, "Everything that makes life worth living on a golden sesame seed bun!"

At least the people in these examples *know* what they are seeking out of life. Tragically, however, they are seeking the wrong thing. Jesus not only commands us to be conscious of our goal; He also tells us what that goal must be, namely, the kingdom of God.

The word *kingdom* sometimes means the realm over which a king reigns. Its more basic meaning, though, is the king's reign or kingship itself. Other synonyms are lordship, power, glory, and honor. This is its meaning in Matthew 6:33. Thus when Jesus says, "Seek first His kingdom," He is saying that we must be seeking God's kingship and glory above all else. In other words, the most important thing in all the world is to bring honor and glory to God. "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31, NAS).

The basic difference between Jesus' teaching and the view described above is this: do you do what you do simply to please yourself, or do you do it to please and honor God? The following contrast illustrates the difference. George Foster, a baseball superstar, has been interviewed many times after an outstanding performance. In his comments he seldom forgets to praise God for his talents. Manifesting a different attitude is Mack Wilken, champion Olympic discus thrower. After he won this event in a recent Olympics, a reporter asked him whether he did it for himself or for his country. His reply was something like this: "I did it for myself. If the U.S. wants to try to claim some of the glory, let it go ahead. But I did it for myself."

How about you? Do you live and act only to please yourself, or to please and honor God first of all?

II. The Means

The next item to be discussed is the means of achieving our goal. We seek to honor God above all else. What is the best way to do this? Jesus gives the answer in Matthew 6:33 in the words "and His righteousness." Nothing enhances and magnifies the lordship of God quite as much as does the effort to conform our lives to the righteousness of God.

The expression "God's righteousness" can mean different things in different contexts. Here it most likely refers to His righteous and holy will as expressed in His commandments. Thus it refers to our efforts to obey His will and live pure and righteous lives. Indeed, righteous living -- being good and doing good -- is truly the best means of honoring God.

This is the meaning of Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:16: "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (NAS). It is possible for us to do good works in a way that glorifies ourselves, so that others will notice us and honor us. Jesus calls this hypocrisy and condemns it (Matthew 6:1-6).

On the other hand, it is possible to use our righteous deeds as spotlights directing people toward God, when we give Him all the glory and praise. An example of this is the great change in Paul's life following his conversion. Certainly the Christians marveled that their former enemy was now preaching and serving Christ. But Paul did not use his conversion and his preaching just to soak up their admiration. His whole life was pointed toward God, so that he could say of those who knew him, "And they were glorifying God because of me" (Galatians 1:24, NAS).

We should remember that the reverse is true as well. Our righteous deeds do indeed honor God; but when we who wear his name do evil deeds, this actually brings *dishonor* upon Him. Paul warns us of this in Romans 2:23, 24: "You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' just as it is written" (NAS).

When a person is known as a Christian, it is as if he had this message printed on every T-shirt and jacket: "I am a Christian. I represent the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whatever you see me doing shows you what I think of my God."

All of us must ask ourselves, "Am I doing the things that bring honor to my Lord? Or does my conduct bring disgrace and shame upon His name?" Even when we are doing things that are righteous in themselves, we must ask, "Am I doing this for the right reason? Am I obeying God because I know it pleases Him and glorifies Him, or am I doing it for some selfish reason?"

There are a number of important lessons connected with this point. One lesson is that being good is not an end in itself; there is something much more important at stake. Another lesson is that *doing what is right* is the most important thing in the world we can do, because this is our best way of glorifying God. A final lesson is that we can do right things for the wrong reasons and thus dishonor and displease God. For instance, being good in order to be saved (or to go to Heaven) is missing the mark. We are saved by grace through faith; we do good works to honor and please the God we love.

III. The Result

In Matthew 6:33 Jesus makes a very significant promise. He says that if you seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, "all these things shall be added to you." The result of putting God's kingdom first is that God will provide the very things most people seem to be panting after. When we devote ourselves to serving God, the provisions for our worldly needs will be supplied as a kind of byproduct or serendipity.

What are "all these things" that God promises to supply? The context shows that Jesus is talking about the daily necessities of life, such as food and clothing in other words, the things

that contribute to the material comfort and happiness of life. This is apparent in Matthew 6:25, 31, 32 as Jesus says,

For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? . . . Do not be anxious then, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "With what shall we clothe ourselves?" For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

How tragic it is that those who *seek* happiness, those who make it their actual *goal* in life, usually do not find it. The secret of happiness is not to seek after it, but to strive to honor God and just trust His promise that He will give us what we need. Could we ask for greater peace of mind or freedom from worry than this?

This little book has only scratched the surface in the study of God's commandments. We could study and meditate upon them for the rest of our days without exhausting their implications for our lives. Indeed, may we *want* to do so! May we have the loving dedication and devotion of the psalmist who says in Psalm 119:97,

O how I love Thy law!
It is my meditation all the day (NAS).

But we can never be content just to *know* God's law. We must resolve to obey it and to conform our lives to it, as Psalm 119:105-106 says,

Thy word is a lamp to my feet,
And a light to my path.
I have sworn, and I will confirm it,
That I will keep Thy righteous ordinances (NAS).

Why will we keep them? Above all else, to honor and please our gracious lawgiver himself.