

Put God First

Carl H. Stevens Jr. is pastor of Greater Grace World Outreach located in Baltimore, Maryland. Pastor Stevens is also chancellor of Maryland Bible College & Seminary and host of the international Christian radio program "The Grace Hour." This booklet was created from a message preached by Pastor Stevens.

Pastor Stevens can be seen weekly on cable television stations throughout the United States. Call us for information regarding programming in your area.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the King James Version. Italics for emphasis are ours.

GRACE PUBLICATIONS

P.O. BOX 18715

BALTIMORE, MD 21206

Printed in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A.

Copyright © 2001

Grace Publications is a ministry of
Greater Grace World Outreach, Inc.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 5

Chapter 1 6

WITH ALL OF OUR HEARTS

Chapter 2 11

COME TO GOD'S ALTAR

Chapter 3 17

DRAW NEAR AND PUT FAITH INTO ACTION

CONCLUSION 25

INTRODUCTION

In everything, God deserves preeminence; He is to be first in my life. My relationship with Him is my most important relationship. As a result, I put His Living Word and His written Word first.

Because of the seriousness of the times we are living in, it is vital that we be in tune with God and give Him first place in our lives.

The Bible is sound, personal, and very relevant for the times we are living in. Our prayer is that the words in this booklet will inspire each of us to put God first in every area of our lives.

Chapter One
WITH ALL OF OUR HEARTS

“Amaziah was twenty and five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty and nine years in Jerusalem. And his mother’s name was Jehoaddan of Jerusalem.

“And he did that which was right in the sight of the LORD, *but not with a perfect heart*” (2 Chronicles 25:1-2).

There are many degrees of following God. In 2 Chronicles 25:1-2, we see Amaziah, a man who did everything right in the sight of God. Amaziah was faithful to go to the house of God. Yet, his heart was not perfect toward God.

“And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment” (Mark 12:30).

This verse first tells us to love the Lord our God with all of our hearts. That means we are to love with fervent and complete commitment in

our motivation, communication, personal application, response, dedication, consecration, and sanctification.

We are also commanded to love the Lord our God with all five parts of our souls, with all of our minds (speaking of our mental attitude), and with all of our strength (referring to our physical bodies). This is the *first* commandment.

The word “first” is the Greek adjective *protos*. We are to put God first wherever we are. He is to rank as the most important Person in our lives. And when He is first, we obey His Word.

In 2 Corinthians 8:5, Paul writes of the Macedonian believers who “first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.” Not only did they submit to God, but also they highly esteemed and honored their pastor-teacher who taught them the Word of God.

Matthew 6:33 says, “Seek ye *first* the kingdom of God.” This means that the Kingdom of God is to be first in time and space, the foundation of the highest possible relationship we have in the world. Our King is the One who is most important in our lives. We are to seek the kingdom of God first, with its Finished Work righteousness, and then all other things will be added unto us.

Maintain a Doctrinal House

“And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).

Spiritually speaking, there should be a sign over our houses that says: “This is a doctrinal house.” The parents in Israel taught their children doctrine when they woke up in the morning, when they walked, and when they ate. Morning, noon, and night, parents placed the doctrines of God in the forefront of their children’s minds (Deuteronomy 4:9-10; 6:4-9).

Some husbands let their wives operate as the head of the home. Some men have never been in charge. It is time for them to take charge and take on the consequences of obedience.

Going Where He Goes

“And it came to pass, that, as they went in the way, a certain man said unto him, Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest.

“And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of

man hath not where to lay his head.

“And he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father.

“Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God.

“And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house.

“And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:57-62).

The Son of man had no place to lay his head. Is this the kind of God you follow and put first? That verse spells “homelessness,” which is what Jesus experienced on earth. Do you want to follow Him? If you truly want to follow Him, that is what it may come to.

Someone wanted to go home and bury his father. Jesus told him, “Let the dead bury the dead. You go and preach the kingdom of God.” Another man said he would follow Jesus, but only after taking time to say farewell to his family. Jesus said to him, “No man who looks back is even fit for the kingdom of God.” We are not even fit for the kingdom if we want to go home

first and follow Christ second.

Jesus Christ will accept nothing but first place in every Christian's life. He will not accept second place.

Chapter Two

COME TO GOD'S ALTAR

“Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O LORD of hosts, my King, and my God.

“Blessed are they that dwell in thy house: they will be still praising thee. Selah” (Psalm 84:3-4)

In Genesis 13:4, Abraham went to the place of the altar, which he had made “at the first.” The altar, in the Old Testament, spoke of the place where the believer bowed down, worshipped, and confessed his sin.

In 2 Samuel 11, we read how King David failed by committing adultery with Bathsheba. When David found out that she had become pregnant, he arranged the death of her husband, Uriah (a faithful soldier in Israel’s army), by sending him to the front line on the battlefield. After David’s sin was exposed, Nathan the

prophet told him that the child conceived with Bathsheba would become sick and die.

David fasted and prayed for the child's healing. But when he learned that the child was dead, David got up, "washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the LORD, and worshipped" (in 2 Samuel 12:20).

Because David had begun to understand that God's altar was a place of the mercy and grace of God, he might have prayed like this: "Lord, I have confessed my sins and I surrender my life back to You. I am not going to stay at home. I am not going to think that I am not good enough. I am not going to withdraw. I will continue to go to the house of the Lord. That is where I will get right with You. I want to dwell with You, Lord, all the days of my life."

No longer in mourning, David chose to put God first—ahead of his sin and guilt. Then, he went home. Cleansing, redemption, rebound—that is what the altar was for. And as New Testament believers, we have a Finished Work altar that keeps us pure as we put Christ first in our lives.

Changed Altar, Changed Glory

“Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible.

“And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts” (Malachi 1:7-8).

The altar had changed for the Jewish people. It was polluted and was no longer, as it had been, the most beautiful thing in Abraham’s life. Exodus 40:33-35 says that after Moses finished the work on the tabernacle and had placed the ark and the mercy seat within, a cloud covered the tent of the congregation. Moses could not enter in because of the cloud and the glory of God that filled the tabernacle. The same thing happened when Solomon’s temple was finished (1 Kings 8:10-11; 2 Chronicles 5:13-14). The presence of God is so holy.

Several scriptures in the Old Testament refer to the ark as God’s resting place, His dwelling place. Specifically, the Bible says that the place of His presence was upon the mercy seat that covered the ark, between the golden cherubim

(1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Psalm 80:1; Isaiah 37:16).

According to 2 Kings 25:9-17, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed that temple by fire when he took the people of Israel into captivity. (Also, see Psalm 74:7 and Isaiah 64:11.) Articles from the tabernacle were carried away into Babylon; but there is no further mention of the ark or the mercy seat.

Later, according to Ezra 1:1, King Cyrus of Persia was stirred by the Lord, and he made a decree that the children of Israel should rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Even though Cyrus was not a Jew, he saw the importance of putting God first. He knew that if Israel was blessed, he would be blessed. The salvaged vessels were “restored, and brought again unto the temple,” when the temple was rebuilt and dedicated (see Ezra 6:1-22); however, nothing is said about the glory of the Lord filling it.

Those who built the temple did everything right. They did everything just as the Bible said. Yet, as far as we know, the glory of God did not fill that temple. There was no ark of God’s presence; there was no mercy seat.

Our Bodies: The Temple of God

Our bodies are the temple of God. Some Christians struggle so much with getting right with God because they don't have any glory inside of them.

"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

"Remember, therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent" (Revelation 2:4-5).

God addressed this passage to the church of Ephesus. "I know how hard you have worked. I know your works," God said to the believers there. "I know that you hate those who do evil. I know you have tested those who say they are apostles and they are not, and you have found them to be liars. I know of your patience and your labors. I know you have not fainted. But I have something against you—you have left your first love. Repent, lest I come quickly. I want you to do your first works."

The people at Ephesus had lost their first love. They had stopped doing their first works, which are the works of faith. What is the work

of God? John 6:29 says it is but to believe. They had lost their first love. What is “first love”? It is God loving me as a sinner, dying for me, shedding His blood for me, being buried for me, rising again for me, ascending to heaven for me, and loving me just as I was when I was evil and wicked. I received that love. That is first love.

When something is going on in your life, don’t do some other thing—do the *first* thing. God’s Word should be first. It is God’s place. God’s work, God’s provision, God’s presence—these things must be first. The first thing we do is to live in the possibility of a limitless life with the glory of God, at the altar of God with its horns. Live in the love of God with the faith of God that produces the works of God.

God must be first. Serve God because He is first. Love God first. Obey God first. Honor God first.

Chapter Three

DRAW NEAR AND PUT FAITH INTO ACTION

“And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth.

“And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?

“Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.

“I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.

“As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

“When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay,

“And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent.) He

went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing" (John 9:1-7).

Jesus said to the blind man, "Go to the pool. I am not going to heal you right here. I want you to go ahead and do something by faith while you are still blind." To the man who had not walked for thirty-eight years, Jesus said, "Rise up and walk." He didn't say, "Stay home, sit still, you're sick. He did not say, "Because you are blind, you just stay there."

God wants faith. He wants faith. Go to God when you are tired. Go when you are weary. You will be filled when you are feeling discouraged. You will be quickened when you are feeling down, lifted up when you are feeling low, and blessed when you are feeling empty. There is power for you when you feel faint. Always draw near. Come close to God with character, conviction, communion, communication, obedience, and response. Honor the will of God in obedience.

Why had the altar changed in Israel? Why did the glory of God depart? Why is it that these things happened when they did everything right? They had lost their first love.

We need to trust God for our children. Trust God for them. "Suffer the little children to come

unto Me, for such is the kingdom of God," Jesus said. How can the children hear the Word if they are not brought to church? They—as all of us—need to sit down, take notes (if they are old enough), and listen as we are told that Jesus is God, Creator, Redeemer, and Forgiver. Children need to know that Jesus gave His life as a ransom for us and that He is all in all (Colossians 3:11). They need to hear that they are going to meet God face to face one day. Whether a child is five or seven years old, one day he will meet the Lord face to face. Children need to be told that God is everything. They need to learn to put Him first.

Children need to seek God first and love Him first, making Him most important. They need to know that God is first. Teen-agers need to know that attendance to a local church is first (over staying home and watching TV).

Most of us are smart enough to go to the doctor when we are sick. A person who is sick is not afraid to go to the doctor's office. The place David went after he had fallen was the house of God. He knew where to go when he was spiritually sick. For some, it would be good to come to the house of God, go down to the front, and make an altar for themselves. All of us should

kneel before God and humble ourselves before Him.

A person can leave his church, leave a body of believers; however, he can never sever himself from Jesus Christ's Body. Even if that person chooses to never talk to us again, we still will feel the pain of missing that member of the Body, for it is Christ's Body (see Ephesians 1:22-23).

Boldly Come to the House of God

"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus,

"By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh;

"And having an high priest over the house of God;

"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

"Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)

"And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:

"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves

together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching" (Hebrews 10:19-25).

When a believer fails, he should come to the house of God. The Greek text of this passage reveals that church attendance was not a priority for those Christians because of the persecution going on at the time. Still, believers are to purpose to draw near through church attendance, even in the midst of the persecution.

As believers, we should draw near and have our consciences made totally clean. God will remove every single feeling of shame and guilt. He will cleanse our consciences and make us brand-new. Then, having our bodies "washed with pure water," the physical body feels well again, because the conscience is right again. When we put God first, hearing the Word of God will be a priority.

If you have failed and withdrawn from fellowship, go back to church and put God first.

I can guarantee you that one day, every knee will bow before the Lord, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is God. Our God is a jealous God, and He wants to be "all, and in all" in our lives (Colossians 3:11). This is why we are to seek Him first. Let's seek His Kingdom first.

Let's seek His righteousness first.

Staying True to the Truth

A pastor does not quote Scripture and serve God to manipulate anyone. The pastor with a heart after God desires to prepare his people, so he can present them to Jesus Christ with a smile, saying, "Here's a faithful servant." This pastor wants to present people before Christ's Bema Seat with joy (Hebrews 13:17). This is what this pastor lives for. It is his life. Therefore, he cannot be a respecter of persons. He has to serve God first.

When we love God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, and all of our strength, then we draw nearer and nearer to God, holding fast to our profession of faith. Furthermore, we encourage others to draw near (Hebrews 10:24). We don't forsake the assembly (Hebrews 10:25). Whatever we do, we do all to glorify God.

God created the universe. He holds all things together by the Word of His power (Hebrews 1:3). By Him all things consist (Colossians 1:17). Therefore, the Lord must have preeminence in all things (Colossians 1:18). It is our Lord with Whom we must be intimate.

Christ died for us and shed His blood for us, taking upon Himself every sin we have ever committed, paying the penalty for it all. The One who gave us His righteousness deserves to have us come into His house. He deserves our love for the altar He prepared for us. He deserves our obedience in honoring His Church, the Body of Christ. He deserves to have us put Him first. He will take care of our families and everything else that pertains to us if we are reasonable in putting Him first.

The believers at Ephesus did everything right, but according to Revelation 2:1-7, they had lost their first love. They were not doing their first works. They were not operating in a faith that serves by love (Galatians 5:6).

The Need for Obedience

We need to have honor and reverence toward Jesus Christ and the Word of God. If God tells me to preach that drinking alcohol is wrong, then I am going to preach that it is wrong. It is up to those who hear the Word to obey it. That is between them and God, but no one will stop me from telling people what God says.

For this reason, I preach that believers

should be baptized as soon as possible after they are saved. Baptism doesn't save anyone, but God said to do it. Baptism is a confession before God and the angels and the demons of what has happened in the heart of a Christian. We go down into the water, representing Christ's death and burial, and we come up out of it in His resurrection. It is a practical expression that I have believed in the truth of God's Word, and it shows that I am not ashamed to identify with obedience to God's command.

We are living in an urgent hour. There is more heart disease today than at any time in human history. There is more and more cancer in people's bodies now than at any time in the past twenty-five years.

God's people need to become involved with intercession and prayer. Without being pessimistic, we need to have a measure of solemnity. Every morning we should present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to Him. This is our reasonable service. Let us not be conformed to this world, but instead be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Then, we will prove what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God with our measure of faith (Romans 12:1-3). Let us put God first in everything.

CONCLUSION

Great peace have they that love doctrine. Nothing offends them because they live by every word of God, putting Him first. Grace is not something that gives us license to act unseemly; Grace is our teacher, showing us God's ways.

Jesus Christ said, "If any man serve Me, let him follow Me, so that where I am, there shall this man be also. And, whosoever keeps on following Me, him will My Father honor all the time" (see John 12:26).

What would it take to cause me to stop following God's Son? The answer is "nothing," if God ranks first in my life. He is first in importance. His Word released in the power of His Spirit must be first in my life.

I thank God that He will be the first to stand and greet us when we die—He will stand to His feet before the angels even begin to carry us home (Acts 7:56).

When we are sensitive to put Jesus Christ first in every detail of our lives—in love, life, and light, using rebound when we fail—miracles of His power will be released. We have seen it in our church recently, because so many people have committed themselves to coming early and praying before the services. This new attitude and this new dedication to prayer and to worship have made a remarkable difference in our services.

We have seen such a moving of God and have learned that not a single thing is impossible with God when we put Him first.