

“First Things”

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Needing God is your greatest need.

Luke 6:12-26

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Fundamentals

I have been asking my Bible study groups this week about “first things” (aka “fundamentals”) in hobbies, careers, and sports. Here are some of the responses.

Pastor Kevin played baseball all through his childhood. It’s what brought him to Hickory on a baseball scholarship with Lenoir Rhyne, and therefore how we first met him about 15 years ago. Now he coaches boys, including his own. So the subject of “first things” in baseball makes him think T-ball. He said the fundamentals at the plate are (1) hit the ball and (2) run. In the field, (1) stop the ball and (2) throw. Three and 4-year-olds can’t catch. That’s a lesson for later. Stop the ball, then throw it.

John Fuller has spent much of his life as a Scout, and much of his adult life as a Scout leader. He said the fundamentals of leading Scouts are: (1) stay calm, (2) learn to tie knots, and (3) expect failure.

Austin Allran just published his first novel. He said the number one rule, which he had to learn the hard way, is “Write the plot first.” Then, just keep writing.

If I have an expertise, it’s not any particular sport. Not even basketball, which was my sport in high school. I have some hobbies I hope to hone in retirement, especially woodworking. What I know best are churches and pastoring. I’ll save my list of “first things” for the end of the sermon.

What I’ve noticed is that fundamentals in all these areas have at least three elements in common. (1) They are “first things.” If you don’t start there, you’re not likely to progress (2) These first things must become second nature. They have to

become like mental muscle memory. If a college baseball player is still having to tell himself, “Hit the ball and run” or “Stop the ball and throw,” well, he’s probably not a college baseball player. (3) You can’t stop with first things. You must keep learning.

In Luke 6, Jesus is going to teach us the “first things” about following him, about discipleship, about being a Christian. As with other areas of life, you have to start here, first things must become second nature, and you must keep learning.

Choosing twelve (12-16)

Last week in our study of Luke, Jesus amazed everyone by his authority in teaching and his power over sickness and demons. The Sonrise was spectacular, and Luke wants his readers to be just as amazed as those who first encountered him in Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

In chapter 5, Luke records a clear separation in response to Jesus. While more and more individuals are drawn to him, the establishment feels threatened by him because he does not adhere to their well-established norms. This is especially true in relation to keeping the Sabbath. But it’s more. It’s one thing to convey authority in teaching and power over disease and evil. But he claimed authority to forgive sins! The establishment begins to discuss how they can sideline Jesus.

We know something big is getting ready to happen when Jesus spends all night in prayer (12). This is the Bible’s only mention of an all-night personal prayer vigil, even for Jesus. Luke doesn’t tell us what Jesus prayed or even why, but he definitely wants your attention on whatever it is. It must be pivotal because even amazing Jesus, who can heal, teach, and forgive sins, needs time with the Father more than he needs sleep.

In the morning, he calls together his disciples and chooses twelve of them whom he designates as apostle. This is the first place I want you to slow down and maybe close your eyes to imagine this scene. Jesus has been drawing crowds of people increasingly attaching themselves to him. In my mind there are hundreds of people who have assembled on a hillside or plateau.

The verbs are important – calls, chooses, designates. The nouns are even more so, and their meaning would have been evident both in Jesus’ day and when Luke wrote his gospel decades later. A “disciple” is a learner, yes, but it’s a very loyal learner. An apprentice, an intern, an understudy. I’ve been listening to an audio book called *The Secret Life of Groceries*. The man many consider to be the father of the modern supermarket was Joe Coulombe, whom you might recognize by the chain he founded: Trader Joe’s. Before he launched Rexall drugs and later Trader Joe’s, this college graduate and MBA volunteered to work for free for a local successful grocer in exchange for 30 minutes of time every day to pick his brain. He was a disciple first.

Jesus had lots of such people tagging along as his popularity soared. Some wanted healing, but even after that, they just wanted to be with him. Now he is going to designate twelve, and only twelve of them, as apostles. The literal meaning of the word is “one who is sent,” but there’s much more. Both Jews and Gentiles in the first century would have understood that an apostle is not just sent, an apostle is sent with authority to represent the sender – an envoy, a deputy, an emissary.

This is why Jesus spent all night in prayer. You know how all of them will loom large in the rest of Jesus’ public ministry and life on earth, and well beyond. But nobody knows that on the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and no one reading Jesus’ story for the first time in Luke’s gospel knows it either. Can you imagine the silence, the tension even, as Jesus says, “Disciples, gather around. I’m going to deputize twelve of you whom I will send out. What these twelve do and say will represent me. Here are the names....”

Luke puts into the record the names of the Twelve. In his gospel, we have met four of them. We first met Simon in chapter 4 when Jesus healed his mother-in-law of a mega fever. In chapter 5, Jesus encountered Simon after a fishing all-nighter that had been frustratingly unproductive. I’m sure he was exhausted, but Jesus borrowed Simon’s boat as a platform and PA system to teach people and then amazed him with a net breaking catch of fish that almost sank two fishing boats. The other boat belonged to James and John, also now on the list of apostles. Another name on the list is Matthew, whom Luke had introduced as Levi the tax collector in chapter 5. That story was about Jesus’ willingness to eat and identify with a bunch of Jewish people no respectable people liked.

This group is rather ordinary. They are not the religious or political elite. They are shocking choices – and shocking especially to those chosen. Their reaction was probably along the lines of, “Who, me?” Two pairs of brothers. Four fishermen. Simon gets a new name – The Rock. Two of them – even all these years later – need to be identified with Daddy’s name. Perhaps the most significant facts Luke wants you to notice is that one of them is a Zealot – we would call him a terrorist – associated with a group of people who advocated for violent overthrow of the Roman occupation. One can only imagine that he and Matthew, the Roman collaborator, had little in common except that they both admired Jesus.

At the end of the list is the name Luke ominously identifies as Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. There will be more to that story, but all we need to know now is that Jesus, who had spent all night in prayer before announcing his choices, included someone who was a sham disciple – an imposter at worst or maybe just someone who thoroughly misunderstood Jesus’ mission and methods.

Joy in the crowd (17-19)

The next place I want you to slow down is in verses 17-19. Imagine this scene. Jesus has descended from the hillside to a more level place. It's later in the morning or maybe even afternoon by now. The crowd that has gathered is more diverse. Notice the distinction between "a large crowd of his disciples" and "a great number of people." We now have three groups of people – twelve apostles, a broader group of disciples, and "people" who are not necessarily committed to following Jesus but curious, at least. Some of them might be among the antagonists. They have come from Judea and Jerusalem, a minimum of three days' journey (80 miles) to the south, as well as Tyre and Sidon, at least two days' journey (50 miles) to the north. More significantly, those from Tyre and Sidon were not Jews.

They had come "to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured...." His amazing reputation had spread. Now imagine *all* the people trying to touch him, and how the power coming from him was "healing them *all*." This is a scene of chaos, rather uncomfortable for an introvert like me. But it's full of energy and joy. If you are or ever were a groupie, screaming for joy and pressing forward with the crowd toward a singer or celebrity, that's what this is like.

It's into this scene that Jesus speaks the "first things," the fundamentals of discipleship. He kind of spoils the mood, in my view, as he had in Nazareth back in chapter 4. Jesus is not a politician trying to ride the wave of frenzy into even greater popularity. Nor is he an evangelist now telling you how to give money or issuing an altar call. What he says next is more likely to turn people off, thin the crowd, or at least evoke curiosity. I would say his list of "first thing" still has that effect now.

First things

There has been a lot of discussion this week on what Jesus says in verses 20-26.

Be honest with me: You don't like what Jesus says in these verses. You may or may not understand it, but you don't like it whether you understand it or not. The energy in the crowd drains precipitously. It's like an NFL playoff where the home town was ten points ahead and the roar was deafening – until the visiting team scored a touchdown, got a turnover, and scored another touchdown to go ahead with a minute to go. The silence is palpable, if only by contrast to what had just been happening.

I don't know how much you pay attention to our corner sign through the week, but I deliberately placed on the sign the two most heart stopping sentences of Luke's version of the Beatitudes.

- "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (20).
- "Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort." (24).

The fact that they're both puzzling on first read is part of Jesus' strategy as a teacher but also as a disciple-maker. Jesus is not one to put the cookies on the bottom shelf, to make this as easy as possible. Sometimes, maybe always, he wants your perseverance and your effort if you're going to be his disciple.

If you have an explanation that makes it easy for you to wiggle out of this, you're not really listening to Jesus. If, for example, you think "poor" means "poor in spirit" (like Matthew's version reads), as in "spiritually poor," you've got a problem as soon as you get to the "rich" part. Whatever "poor" means, "rich" is its counterpart.

The key to what Jesus is saying is the repetition of the second person plural pronoun – you and your, literally y'all and y'all's. It's as if Jesus is pointing out groups of people. In this diverse crowd of people (not just apostles and disciples) from all over are the powerless and powerful, poor and rich, sad and happy, hungry and fat. Jesus, as he so often does, is turning upside down the values of the world. The powerless and poor and sad and hungry tend to envy the powerful and rich and happy and fat. And it's the other way around. The powerful and rich and happy and well-fed tend to look with pity and condescension toward *les miserables*. The word Jesus uses for "laugh" (25), for example, means to laugh in derision, an evil kind of laughter that mocks and scorns those who are less privileged.

Whatever else we might say about this text, we have to hear Jesus agreeing with the rest of the Bible that God doesn't value privilege and power and wealth. It's not a sign of his favor. You and I have more stuff and more privilege. We can't deny it. Most of us would have been those through whom Jesus would have stared a hole as he said, "Woe to y'all who are rich." We might be tempted to look away or look around or look confused and say, "Me?" Yup, you. To whatever degree that's true of us, one takeaway has to be that this wealth and status do not imply that Jesus has blessed our faith and character. Our elevated status in the world should create mistrust of ourselves and our motives and a deep desire to improve the lot of others in whatever way we can.

But back to "first things." What Jesus is doing is using very graphic, even poetic, language of extremes to give the fundamentals of following him as a disciple. You have to start here. You can't stay here, but you have to start here. This way of thinking needs to become second nature or nothing else in his kingdom will make sense. He's saying the same thing that's all over the Bible – either explicit or assumed. It's this....

First, the goal of discipleship is not personal comfort. If you follow Jesus, your life is likely to be better for many reasons. But if you follow Jesus to make your life better – to be wealthier, happier, healthier, more powerful, you're going to be deeply and regularly disappointed, even disillusioned. You're going to claim some Bible verse as your promise that Jesus will give you prosperity and success, and at the first sign of a

crisis – money, health, family – you’re going to complain. “Then why am I a Christian?” Lesson one of following Jesus is that he has never promised a comfortable life.

Second, keep your focus on Jesus and eternity. “Follow me,” he keeps saying to people. Make the Son of Man and his kingdom your goal. Train your mind to ponder your reward in heaven, not what this earth has to offer.

Third, self-sufficiency is your greatest spiritual risk. You think it’s your goal not to need anyone or anything. That’s what that old liar the devil is trying to convince everyone. Don’t let him draw you into his value system. You think life is at its best when you are comfortable and well fed and snickering at everyone further down the ladder because they all envy your position. One of the “first things” in following Jesus is that this is precisely the moment your soul is in grave danger.

Jesus doesn’t tell this crowd, “If you’re rich, strive to become poor. If you’ve had a meal, go on a fast. If everyone loves you, try to tick them off a little.” No, he simply identifies these as warning signs, danger zones. Needing God is your greatest need.

The unity of grace

So back to “first things” for me. As I said, I don’t know much about hunting or football or business. I know a little about churches, at least insofar as I have experienced this one.

The title of the little book I wrote last year summarizes what I think are “first things” about church life – unity and grace. If we’re going to be a church that not only survives but thrives in the next generation, we can’t forget these first things. From Day 1 when Jesus first taught disciples about discipleship, he called that group of twelve to unity. Fishermen needed to learn with tax collectors, terrorists with collaborators, Galileans with non-Galileans and all of them even with someone who wasn’t really a disciple. They couldn’t go on mission with Jesus unless they lived out what Jesus would later teach them – love each other so the world will know who I am.

You can’t live like that in the church without grace. On a fairly regular basis someone tells me about disappointment with me or someone else in the church. I don’t always say it, but I’m almost always thinking it, “That’s who we are.” The church, individually and collectively, is a group of flawed people who have experienced and are extending grace to one another.

All this brings us right back to the first of first things: Jesus. Discipleship’s first and greatest fundamental is attachment to him. John Mark Comer says it this way: “To be Jesus’ disciple then and now is to be someone who orders his/her life around three goals: Be with Jesus, Become like Jesus, and Do what Jesus did.” Amen.