

## God First, Others Second, Me Third?

I recently attended an event for which young children had made posters. I didn't have time to look at them all, but because this one poster had large letters and was up front as if to give it importance, my eyes instantly saw it. My heart sunk because this was an event put on by a Christian school. It read:

GOD is first.  
OTHERS are second  
I am third.

There was a time in my life when I wouldn't have thought twice about this way of thinking, but this time, it cut me to the core. Now, I am aware that we are instructed:

### ***Philippians 2:3-4***

*Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*

And clearly, this is a good way to live. Jesus commanded us to, "Love one another as I have loved you." As this chapter goes on to explain, we are to have the same mind of Christ—that humbly giving ourselves for others. This refers to a sacrificial love which puts the interests of others above our own.

But notice verse 4. It says, "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but ALSO for the interests of others."

Normally, we don't need instruction to look out for our own interests. It is assumed here that we will be doing that, but ALSO means "too" in the Greek. It doesn't mean "instead of" others, but in addition to others. Just as you look out for your own interests, look out for the interests of others. This is a liberating and marvelous way to live. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than receive." What a joy to be able to help someone.

We see this evidenced also where Paul tells men to love their wives.

### ***Ephesians 5:28-29***

*So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup>For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.*

Paul is acknowledging facts in evidence when he states that normal people do care for themselves. He doesn't use this to make a list but to make a point. Take care of your wife as well as you take care of yourself, as well as Christ loved the church.

Obvious this instruction comes about because some people, even some believers, DO think ONLY in terms of taking care of themselves. So, even as believers we need to be reminded to not only take into consideration our interests, but ALSO those of others. This is why I think Jesus' one commandment to His disciples before He died was to love one another." He knew we would need to be reminded.

### **1 John 3:23**

*And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.*

So, what was bothering me about the list? It obviously isn't the idea that we should ALSO consider the needs of others. It is something deeper. It's the list itself. It cuts to the core.

1. God is first. 2. Others are second. 3. I am third.

One might fairly point out that God is first, and I am naturally going to take care of my own interests second but that I should ALSO consider the needs of others. But no one likes this list: God is first. I am second. Others are last. We know that's not right either.

It's the list that twists our thinking.

By definition a list begins somewhere and ends somewhere.

There is first and eventually, there is last.

Why do we need this list or any list? Lists imply importance. Somewhere in the list I saw posted, a child, even an adult does not necessarily hear, "I should consider others' needs as more important than my own. By making a list, what someone might hear, especially a child is, not that I am third, but that I AM LAST.

But consider the dozens of Scriptures that teach us how much God loves us individually and personally—how He has made us His very own children? Because He loves us all, He sent His Son to take our penalty for sin; that is, death.

What about, "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so,"?

Consider list-making in prayer.

When I was a little girl, we were taught how to pray using our hands. We began with our thumb and used our other fingers to represent other areas we were “supposed” to pray about first. I don’t remember now what each finger represented, but I have never forgotten the sting of being told my needs were the little finger. It was explained that my needs were not as important as the other things I should pray for. My heart heard YOU are the little finger, and YOUR needs are not that important to God. YOU aren’t as important either. God cares about all of these other people, but you, not as much. I even remember feeling guilty that I would have such selfish thoughts about being the smallest and most insignificant finger.

In fact, some adult formulas for prayer teach that AFTER praying for the entire world first, we won’t even want to pray for our own needs (the inference being that we SHOULDN’T want to pray for our own needs), and that to pray for one’s own needs is a selfish thing to do, even in the eyes of God.

The problem is each of us has needs, and some of them are pressing. Our health might be failing and we need help now. Our finances might be unraveling, and we need wisdom or relief immediately. Our relationships are so painful we can hardly walk through our days. Sometimes we barely have the strength to pray at all, let alone all the things on the list which pale in light of what we are experiencing so intensely. We are made to feel shame or guilt for wanting to be the only thing we pray right now.

Without elaborating here, this is just nonsense.

God is our Father. He wants to hear our prayers. He wants us to come before “His throne of grace to find mercy and grace to help in times of need.” We ARE important to him, as important as any other person. He isn’t requiring us to pray a list. That is a manmade formula.

As adult believers the list continued, except “God first” stopped meaning we should focus on God in the personal sense, “but it came to mean everything pertaining to God which amounted to a long list of Spiritual disciplines and service to God in the church.

So, we’d *say* God first, but there was a never-ending sublist. This pushed Christ’s command further down the list because we were so busy loving God first that we scarcely had time for our family, let alone others.

It wasn’t my total liberation, but the power of this list began to crack one day as I was listening to the radio about 40 years ago. This person was also objecting to a list. She too had a similar list to ours. The list kept growing. So our distance from God and others was much further away because it was openly said that we could not expect God to answer our prayers in times of need if we hadn’t been putting time into the list of spiritual disciplines, and on and on and on.

Please consider this more accurate perspective which I have amplified over time as my understanding has grown. Think of a sphere that extends outward. In the center is God who radiates outward, and extending outward is everything imaginable that is of importance. God's love extends to every area of our lives. He doesn't need a list. He can handle everything and everyone all at once. So no one and nothing is second or last on the list. This is how we live our lives—with the awareness that God lives inside of us and radiates from us into every aspect of life.

If you have more than one child, I hope you don't have a list. You love all of them equally and care for all of them as each one needs. You love your parents, your relatives, your friends, your neighbors, your fellow believers, the lost, and you don't need a list of who is more important. Even you, an mortal person, are capable of loving everyone at the same time. Imagine God who loves every single person on this planet equally. He sent His Son for them all.

God does not have a list. He doesn't ask us to have a list. He asks us to love each other and to respect each other and not take on the attitude that we are more important to God than others. Just as Jesus humbled Himself and became a servant to us, so we can take on the same attitude toward others.

We don't need to put God at the top of a list.

God lives inside of us. He loves through us. We are not God, but He is in the center of our lives loving people as He loves us. If you must still have a list, try this. There is no need to put numbers before this list. All exist simultaneously.

God EXISTS.

Jesus died and lives inside of me because God loves ME.

God asks me to love as I am loved.

Think about it, and please especially consider the concepts your child or student is developing about God's love for him/her. "We love because He first loved us." If we don't know how deeply we are loved, it will be difficult to genuinely love others.