

I am Third

In America, we are taught to prepare and practice to win in all competition. We value first place. We honor winners. We are to beat out others to get the top job. We are to win the tournament. We are taught to be self-advocates. We are to raise our index fingers when we score or succeed. But the Bible teaches something different. It teaches that we are to come in third. That is to say, the Bible teaches that God comes first, our neighbors come second, and that we are third. We see that we are to put God as number one in the very first commandment God gave to Moses in Exodus:

You shall have no other gods before me. --Exodus, Chapter 20

That theme is repeated throughout the Old Testament, with this reference perhaps being the most clear:

14 To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.¹² And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,¹³ and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? --Deuteronomy 10:14 then verses 12-13

So everything that has ever been created, and everything that ever will be created, is God's—it all belongs to him. Including us...we belong to God.

And Jesus repeats this idea—that God is first—when he is asked by the leaders of his time about what is most important.

35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." --Matthew, Chapter 20

As Jesus says above, we are to put our neighbors in second place in the pecking order of life by loving them as ourselves. This, too, is a theme that is repeated throughout the scriptures. In fact, Jesus' best friend, the Apostle John, helps us understand HOW we live out the first commandment to love God. We do that by acting out the second commandment. We love God by loving our neighbors.

10 So now we can tell who are the children of God and who are the children of the Devil. Anyone who does not obey God's commands and does not love others does not belong to God.¹¹ This is the message we have heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ¹⁴ If we love others, it proves that we have passed from death to eternal life. But a person who doesn't love them is still dead. ¹⁵ Anyone who hates another is really a murderer at heart. And you know that murderers don't have eternal life within them. ¹⁶ We know what real love is because Christ gave up his life for us. And so we also ought to give up our lives for others. ¹⁷ But if anyone has enough money to live well, and sees someone need and refuses to help—how can God's love be in that person? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions. ¹⁹ It is by our actions that we know we are living in the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before the Lord... ²³ And this is his commandment: We must believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another,

just as he commanded us. 24Those who obey God's commandments live in fellowship with him, and he with them. And we know he lives in us because the Holy Spirit lives in us.

--1 John, Chapter 3

7Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8But anyone who does not love does not know God—for God is love.9God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. 10This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. 11Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. 12No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love has been brought to full expression through us.13And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. 14Furthermore, we have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15All who proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God. 16We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in him. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. 17And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. 19We love each other as a result of God loving us first. 20If someone says, "I love God," but hates others that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we have not seen? 21And God himself has commanded that we must love not only him but others. --1 John, Chapter 4

So where does that leave us? We are third. Yet we are important and loved by God. It is just that God knows that we will only really feel good about ourselves when we put him and then others before us. When we put him and others first, God becomes more active in our lives. We know him more intimately and then our lives are more enriched. In fact, the key to being happy in life is to live in 3rd place. Selfishness and self-centered living are the primary contributors to an unhappy life. If you are selfish and self-centered, eventually people tire of you and move on, out of a relationship with you. Then you are alone. And people were not designed to be alone. We were designed to live in community...in close relationship...with others. After all, the scriptures say, "It is not good for people to be alone..." This is how the Apostle Paul speaks of living for yourself:

3Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. 4Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing. --Philippians, Chapter 2

Years ago there used to be a popular saying, "If you love someone, let them go." The idea was that true love, or better said, loving truly, only happens when all sides are free to give and take, to come and go. But in the Bible, we see a teaching that actually says that to give away things is more fun than to get things or to keep money. In other words, sharing with others or giving to God—generous living—is actually a really fun way to live.

32"Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. 33I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. 34You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. 35In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' " --Acts, Chapter 20