

FIRST THINGS FIRST

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” (Matt 5:23-24)

Now I'm confused! When one of the experts in the Law tested Jesus about priorities, Jesus answered that priority number one was to love God. Priority number two was to love your neighbor (Matt. 22:34 - 40). Now Jesus seems to reverse that order. In this passage He said that BEFORE we bring a gift to God we are to FIRST be reconciled to our brother. How can this be?

At first glance, it “seems” that Jesus is contradicting Himself and reversing priorities. Obviously, He is not. From the very beginning God has commanded us to love one another and not be like Cain (1 Jn. 3:11 - 12). Anyone who claims to love God while hating his brother is a liar. If we do not love our brother, whom we have seen, how can we claim to love God Whom we have not seen (1 Jn. 4:20). It is God Himself Who wants mercy and not sacrifice. Note carefully these inspired words: **“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6)** Do you see it? Showing mercy to mankind is equated with the “acknowledgment of God”. The prophets condemned those who “tried” to love God without loving their neighbor (See Is. 1:10 - 17; 58:1 - 7; Jer. 22:16 - 17; 22:28 - 31; Amos 4:1; Zph. 7:10 etc.) In fact, the Scriptures describe “pure religion”, not as making sacrifices directly to God, but by taking care of orphans and widows (Ja. 1:27).

Joseph knew that to commit fornication was to sin against God (Gen. 39:9). After David's sin of adultery and murder, he confessed to God: **“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,” (Ps 51:4)**. On the road to Damascus Jesus said: **“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4)** At this time, as you know, Jesus was in heaven at the right hand of God. The point is, that by persecuting people, Saul was actually persecuting Jesus.

Conversely, when we do good to mankind, in some mysterious way we are ministering to Christ. Remember the way that Jesus described the Judgement. Jesus said “I” was hungry, “I” was thirsty, “I” was a stranger, “I” needed clothes, “I” was sick, “I” was in prison. The righteous will be rewarded for what they did to people for Jesus said: **“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt 25:40)**.

Remember! The Sabbath Day was made for man, not vice versa. The sun, moon, and stars were also made for man (Gen. 1:14 - 19). The miracle of the incarnation was also for man. Beyond that, **“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32)** The complete comprehension of this truth is beyond the finite mind. It is a part of His unsearchable ways that are past finding out. (Rom. 11:33). It seems that God is so intimately involved with mankind that we either sin against God, or serve Him, by the way we treat one another.

John put it like this: **“This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous” (1 Jn 3:11-12)**. Cain's offering was not accepted by God. He should have FIRST made peace with his brother. Can you see it? Diotrephes didn't. When Diotrephes refused to welcome the brothers he was actually sinning against God (3 Jn. 10). The older brother of the prodical didn't see it either. His lack of love for his brother was a barrier to his Father (Lk. 15:11 - 32). Remember, the “goal” of God's commandments is love (1 Tim. 1:5). When we “first” are reconciled with our brother, we are not dishonoring God. When we show “mercy” we are not demonstrating an inferior attitude. We cannot possibly demonstrate our love for God without loving one another! Let us then conclude with these inspired words: **“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 Jn 4:7-8)**.