

SEEKING FIRST THE KINGDOM

*30 Meditations on How to Love God with All Your
Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength*

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Published by Ministry23, LLC
PO Box 8329 Algonquin, Illinois
60102 ministry23.com

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Imprimi Potest, Luis Garza, LC, JDC

Cover design: Coronation Media
coronationmedia.com

ISBN 978-0-9916038-0-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014937369

Printed in the United States of America

5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

THIS BOOK IS mainly for those who are newly intrigued by Jesus Christ and find themselves wanting to follow him more closely. That desire is the most precious gift God can give to a human heart, because friendship with Jesus Christ is the only path to lasting fulfillment.

But if you feel that desire deeply—if you truly burn with a longing to know Jesus more and more clearly, to love him more and more dearly, and to follow him more and more nearly (to borrow three phrases from a medieval prayer by St. Richard of Chichester)—you will run up against obstacles and roadblocks every step of the way. These obstacles can easily drain that precious desire to seek greater intimacy with God. They can disorient, discourage, and jade even the most well-intentioned Christians. And that can happen at any point in the spiritual journey: the beginning, the middle, or the end. So this book is not only for those just starting. It's also for those who would like some fresh encouragement and some motivating reminders along the way.

Spiritual Integration

One sure way to keep our holy desires strong and vibrant, in spite of roadblocks, is to understand the concept of spiritual integration: bringing every dimension of our being and personality into play in our relationship with God.

Friendship with Christ is a unique friendship, because Jesus is a unique friend. He is not *only* a loyal and loving companion; he is *also* the Lord—Creator and Redeemer of the human race, uniquely worthy of worship and obedience. Friendship with Christ grows, therefore, by allowing Christ's

companionship and lordship to touch and transform every sector of our existence: all our internal powers, which subsequently manifest themselves in all our external activities. This extension of Christ's influence to every corner of our life is the essence of spiritual integration; we gradually integrate, more and more deeply, every facet of our person and experience into our friendship with Jesus Christ. We learn to live more and more *in* Jesus, and he comes to live more and more *in* us. This is the amazing journey toward spiritual maturity.

Life in Christ

This mysterious connection between Christ and the Christian constitutes one of the main themes of the New Testament. St. Paul especially refers to the phrase "in Christ" over and over again. Everything changes for the person who has come to share in Christ's life:

So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

And Jesus himself becomes the life of the one who welcomes him through faith:

I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me. (Galatians 2:19–20)

Normal friendship entails an intimate sharing between two people. As Aristotle is attributed with saying, friendship is "a single soul dwelling in two bodies." But when one of those two souls is infinite and perfect, then intimate sharing is not enough. In this case, the lesser of the two must also allow himself to be transformed and elevated by the greater. This is the case with a Christian and Christ. We must walk with Jesus through life, but we also must humbly and lovingly conform ourselves to Christ (this is what it means to "follow" Jesus Christ) in order to allow this grace-filled friendship to reach maturity. Only thus can we enter fully into Christ's kingdom—the

one kingdom where our longings for an eternally meaningful life can be fulfilled.

Guided by the Holy Spirit

We are not alone in our efforts to conform to Christ. Jesus accompanies us, and actually enables us, every step of the way, especially through the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. St. John Paul II, whose words will accompany you along your journey through these thirty meditations, repeated that essential truth over and over again. For example:

Following Christ is not an outward imitation, since it touches man at the very depths of his being. Being a follower of Christ means becoming conformed to him who became a servant even to giving himself on the cross. Christ dwells by faith in the heart of the believer, and thus the disciple is conformed to the Lord. This is the effect of grace, of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us.¹

Requiring Our Free Cooperation

And yet, Jesus refuses to do all the work himself. He includes us in the project, sharing the work with us. We have to choose, freely and repeatedly, to be faithful to the friendship. Otherwise, it would not be a friendship at all—we would just be pre-programmed Christian robots. But that's not what we were created for. We were created in God's image, to give glory to him by freely living in communion with him, in whom alone we find our lasting happiness.

And so, in this Christian adventure, in this journey toward spiritual maturity, we have a part to play. We are co-protagonists in the process of integrating every facet of our existence into our friendship with Jesus. We are co-conquerors in the battle to bring every sector of our personality and experience and activity under the infinitely wise and sure rule of Christ the Lord.

How do we do our part? How do we cooperate with Jesus to Christianize every single corner of our lives? Jesus sums up the answer with a liberating simplicity:

¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 21.

But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. (Matthew 6:33)

Seeking God's kingdom first, seeking to allow Christ the Eternal King to rule and guide our lives in accordance with his wisdom, goodness, and love, seeking to abide by the Lord's life-giving standards in all that we think, say, and do—this is every Christian's primary task. It is the basic commitment that we make when we fall in love with God and give our hearts to him. Following through on that commitment is how we do our part in allowing God's grace free rein to order and energize our lives on earth, and to bring us to the fullness of eternal life in heaven.

Loving with Everything We've Got

Seeking something involves knowing about it, wanting it, and going out to take possession of it. These three activities correspond to the three basic powers of the human soul: the *mind*, which knows and understands; the *emotions*, which feel attraction and repulsion; and the *will*, by which one makes decisions and takes action.

And so, in essence, seeking God's kingdom means seeking to let Jesus, the everlasting King, rule our minds with his infinite truth, our feelings with his endless beauty, and our decisions with his overflowing goodness. This is how our friendship with Christ matures. This is how we integrate our entire lives into his unique and life-giving friendship. This is how we allow God to transform and bring to full spiritual maturity our minds, our emotions, and our wills—our whole selves, every corner of our lives.

An Ongoing Adventure

The process of integration takes a lifetime, because we are always changing and growing, and because God himself, the one we are seeking, is infinite. Seeking first the kingdom, then, is not something that we can check off our to-do list once and for all. But the more intentionally and intelligently we engage in it, the more quickly and fully God's grace will extend the Lord's rule in our lives and move us further along the path of spiritual maturity.

These initial reflections on what it means to “seek first the kingdom of God” point toward Christ’s own instructions about how to do just that. When he was asked to identify the first and greatest commandment, the path to spiritual maturity, he answered by saying:

The first is: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:29–31)

By using the verb *love*, Jesus centers the human vocation to holiness and happiness not simply on personal achievements, but rather on a relationship—on a personal relationship of intimate and mutual self-giving with God, which happens through friendship with Jesus.

Then, by specifying “heart, soul, mind, and strength,” Jesus points out the importance of integrating our whole personality—every facet of our humanity—into our friendship with God. In this book we will explore each one of those four areas individually, even though in real life they always go together; each one influences and affects all the others.

Finally, by emphasizing that we are to love God with *all* our “heart, soul, mind, and strength,” Jesus indicates the dynamism of this lifetime adventure; it has no limit—we can always deepen our intimacy with God, expand our spiritual integration, and discover new depths of meaning and fulfillment.

This book is an extended reflection on the wealth of wisdom that God has poured into that greatest of all commandments. It unpacks and explores the many implications of what it means to seek first Christ’s kingdom by loving “the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second greatest commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” since it is so closely related to the first, also deserves to be unpacked and explored. But that task is important and large enough to deserve its own treatment; it will be the task of a separate book of meditations.

Using This Book

The thirty short chapters of this book provide explanations and reflections that can help you seek Christ's kingdom and love him with everything you've got, intentionally and intelligently. They are meant to be used for personal meditation or spiritual reading and also for group study and discussion. Praying through one chapter a day can give you a month-long spiritual retreat. The abundant biblical quotations are presented in red in order to make prayer and meditation on God's sacred Word easier, if you use the book in this way .

Working through one chapter a week together with a group of friends can provide a richly rewarding path of Christ-centered fellowship. The questions for reflection at the end of each chapter can serve either as aids for personal reflection and prayer or as helps to spark invigorating small-group interaction. Each chapter's concluding prayer, drawn from various sources that make up the vast, two-thousand-year-old treasury of Christian spirituality, can be prayed individually or as a group. The introductory quotations from St. John Paul II are meant to link the themes of each chapter to the Church's ongoing mission of renewed evangelization, which was so dear to the heart of the pope who led the Christian family across the threshold of the third millennium.

However you choose to take advantage of this resource, if you are truly seeking first the kingdom, you can't go wrong. After all, the Lord himself made the solemn promise: **"Seek, and you will find"** (Matthew 7:7, RSV).

PART I

God's Part and My Part

When a large crowd gathered, with people from one town after another journeying to him, [Jesus] spoke in a parable. "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path and was trampled, and the birds of the sky ate it up. Some seed fell on rocky ground, and when it grew, it withered for lack of moisture. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. And some seed fell on good soil, and when it grew, it produced fruit a hundredfold."

After saying this, he called out, "Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.... This is the meaning of the parable. The seed is the word of God. Those on the path are the ones who have heard, but the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts that they may not believe and be saved. Those on rocky ground are the ones who, when they hear, receive the word with joy, but they have no root; they believe only for a time and fall away in time of trial. As for the seed that fell among thorns, they are the ones who have heard, but as they go along, they are choked by the anxieties and riches and pleasures of life, and they fail to produce mature fruit. But as for the seed that fell on rich soil, they are the ones who, when they have heard the word, embrace it with a generous and good heart, and bear fruit through perseverance." (Luke 8:4–8, 11–15)

Chapter 1

How Much Is Up to Me?

We now need to profit from the grace received, by putting it into practice in resolutions and guidelines for action.

—St. John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 3

JESUS SEEMS TO contradict himself. On the one hand, he tells us that “**apart from me you can do nothing**” (John 15:5, RSV). He is the vine, he explains in the same passage, and we are only branches, completely dependent on the flow of sap and life that comes to us through the vine. The word used for *nothing* in the Greek, in fact, is the simple, total negative—nothing at all, absolute zero.

Yet on the other hand, Jesus looks us in the eye and implores us, “**Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able**” (Luke 13:24, RSV). Here he begs us to put all our effort into following him, obeying him, seeking him. The Greek word for *strive* connotes struggle, fight, and the kind of intensity that amazes us when we watch, riveted, as Olympic athletes battle for the gold.

What is going on here? How can we reconcile our Lord’s injunction that we are absolutely helpless and dependent in the spiritual life with his command to fight to the death, as it were, in order to achieve spiritual maturity and salvation?

St. Paul to the Rescue?

What a relief it would be if St. Paul were to resolve the dilemma for us! But,

this time anyway, he comes up short. He too, it seems, contradicts himself. In defending his apostolic credentials, he points out to the Christians in Corinth that *“by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them; not I, however, but the grace of God with me”* (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Paul attributes all that he is and all that he has accomplished as a follower of Jesus to *“the grace of God.”* But in the same breath, he claims to have contributed to his Christian greatness by having *“toiled harder”* than anybody else. The Greek word used for *toil* connotes wearisome, back-breaking exertion. Etymologically, it harkens back to a term associated with the demanding, harsh, and unrelenting work of an agricultural laborer before the advent of mechanized farm equipment. That’s the kind of contribution St. Paul feels that he has made to his Christian mission, even while he affirms that God’s grace is the sole source of all the good fruits his mission has borne.

We can see no light at the end of this tunnel. We are stuck with the paradox: Our Christian life depends entirely on God’s grace, yet it also depends on our human efforts in order to make that grace bear fruit. It is a partnership.

The theologian-pope, Benedict XVI, affirmed this paradox without trying to explain it away when commenting on our Lord’s parables about seeds:¹

Every Christian, then, knows well that he must do all that he can, but that the final result depends on God: this knowledge sustains him in daily toil, especially in difficult situations.

The Holy Father went on to quote the cavalier-turned-mystic, St. Ignatius of Loyola, to drive the point home:

Act as if everything depended on you, knowing that in reality everything depends on God.

¹ Benedict XVI, Angelus, June 18, 2012.

The Right Proportion

Here we have one of the many binary star systems, spiritually speaking, in the galaxy of the Gospels.

A binary star system happens when two stars share a common center of mass. In such a situation, their orbits are perfectly harmonized and inextricably interdependent. As one moves, the other moves. As one turns, the other turns. They seem to pull against each other, and yet the tension between them is actually the source of their dynamism. Likewise, in our growth toward spiritual maturity, the mysterious partnership between God's action and our action creates a healthy kind of tension from which spiritual dynamism flows.

Each binary star system consists of a brighter star (the primary star) and a dimmer star (the companion star). In our pursuit of intimacy with God—of the spiritual maturity that alone will yield the lasting fulfillment we are created for—God's grace is the primary star, and our effort is the companion star. God's grace is primary, 99 percent. Our striving is secondary, 1 percent. And yet, both are necessary; without the 1 percent, the job will not be done.

To switch analogies, think of cooking. The ingredients for a plate of primavera pasta come from myriad suppliers: the farmers who grow and harvest the wheat and the vegetables, the olive oil and the tomatoes (not to mention the God-given natural forces that give and sustain the lives of those plants); the transportation companies that bring those products to food-processing plants; the food-processing plants themselves; more transportation companies to put the goods in the grocery store; the grocery store team that preserves and arranges and sells... By the time those ingredients are lined up on the kitchen counter and ready to be prepped and cooked, hundreds if not thousands of people have already contributed to the meal. That's like the 99 percent. And yet, unless someone chops, simmers, boils, and stirs, the meal will never make it to the table. That's like the 1 percent.

True Partners

St. Augustine, the great bishop from North Africa who helped the Church survive the cataclysmic fall of the western Roman Empire early on in Christian history, expressed this truth cleverly when he wrote: "God created us

without us: but he did not will to save us without us.”² God created us to live in a relationship with him, not to be robots. So, even though we are entirely dependent on him for our existence and our spiritual growth, he chooses to limit his omnipotence, in a sense, in order to leave us room to become true partners in salvation history.



QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What idea in this chapter struck you most and why?
2. In what ways have you personally experienced this paradox of Christianity, this binary star system of God’s grace and your effort?
3. Explain in your own words why God chooses to make the fruitfulness of his grace in your life depend so much on your collaboration.
4. What will you do today to keep yourself in better harmony with God, the “primary star” of your life?
 - I will say a short prayer of thanksgiving before each meal.
 - I will write a “note to God” thanking him for a specific blessing.
 - (Write your own resolution) I will _____.

Concluding Prayer

*O God, strength of those who hope in you,
graciously hear our pleas,
and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing,
grant us always the help of your grace,
that in following your commands we may please you by our
resolve and our deeds.*

—Roman Missal, Collect for the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

² St. Augustine, *Sermo* 169,11,13:PL 38, 923.

Chapter 2

God Is Faithful

Christianity is grace, it is the wonder of a God who is not satisfied with creating the world and man, but puts himself on the same level as the creature he has made, and after speaking on various occasions and in different ways through his prophets, “in these last days...has spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:1–2).

—St. John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 3

GOD’S GRACE IS never lacking. His 99 percent is always available. He never fails us. He never forgets about us. He never goes on vacation leaving us to fend for ourselves for a while. No—“**God is faithful**,” St. Paul reminds us (1 Corinthians 1:9). Just as he took the initiative to create and redeem us, beginning in us the “**good work**” of holiness, so he “**will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus**” (Philippians 1:6). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us of this in its very first paragraph:

For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. (CCC, 1)

God’s grace, his action, his part, is never lacking. It reaches out to us and surrounds us and sustains us at every time and in every place, like the very atmosphere we breathe.

This is the bottom line in our friendship with Christ. This is the starting line and the finishing line. Jesus, his trustworthiness, his faithfulness, his absolute dependability and unlimited loyalty—this is the “**Alpha and**

the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 22:13, RSV).

A Message from the Cross

This was one of the reasons that God chose to save us through the betrayal, humiliation, torture, crucifixion, and death of his only-begotten Son. Saving us that way shows, once and for all, that nothing we do can cause God to give up on us. He stayed faithful to us, loving and forgiving us, throughout the horrible injustices and crimes that we committed against him during Christ’s passion and death. And after all that, he still loves us and reaches out to us and offers us his grace. Because of that, we have absolute assurance of his undying faithfulness.

St. Paul understood this as well as anyone, and better than most. He put it like this in his letter to the Christians in Rome:

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? (Romans 8:31–32)

In his encyclical letter *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis gave this fundamental truth brilliant expression. He wrote (emphasis added):

The history of Jesus is the complete manifestation of God’s reliability.... The clearest proof of the reliability of Christ’s love is to be found in his dying for our sake. If laying down one’s life for one’s friends is the greatest proof of love (cf. John 15:13), Jesus offered his own life for all, even for his enemies, to transform their hearts. This explains why the evangelists could see the hour of Christ’s crucifixion as the culmination of the gaze of faith; in that hour the depth and breadth of God’s love shone forth.¹

Learning to Trust

It’s easy to say but hard to live; it’s hard to trust that God will always be do-

¹ Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 15–16.

ing his part, the 99 percent, even when we waver or get sloppy in doing our 1 percent.

Our modern, post-Christian culture steadily feeds us the lie that if we just work a little bit harder, or a little bit smarter, we can create heaven on earth; we can perfect ourselves. We tend to believe the lie, because even in the safest of harbors, in the bosom of our family when we're growing up, we discover that human approval and affection can (and sometimes even *must*) be earned. And so this lie seeps into our relationship with God. We feel as if we need to make ourselves worthy of God's grace; he will only do his part, we mistakenly tell ourselves, if we do our part really, really well.

God knows how hard it is for us to trust him, and he is always looking for ways to help us out. As a result, the story of salvation that unfolds in the pages of the Bible comes back to the truth of God's utter reliability over and over again, like a refrain. God manifests his faithfulness to his people all the way from the very beginning, through the experiences of Abraham, Moses, all the kings and prophets of the Old Testament, and all the apostles and saints of the New Testament. Maybe the Blessed Virgin Mary expressed it best when she simply proclaimed: "*His mercy is from age to age*" (Luke 1:50, RSV).

Images that Inspire Confidence

The prayer book of the Old Testament (and of the Church), the Psalms, draws on images from the natural world to dispel the hesitancy of our fallen nature and emblazon confidence in God on our hearts. Read Psalm 36:5–6, for example:

*LORD, your mercy reaches to heaven;
your fidelity, to the clouds.
Your justice is like the highest mountains;
your judgments, like the mighty deep.*

The psalmist compares the immeasurable qualities of God to some of the most evocative scenes of the created world. The vast expanse of the sky, the atmosphere that surrounds and upholds us every moment, whether or not we are aware of it, is a pale reflection of the Lord's "mercy and faithfulness."

Is there a limit to the sky, to the heavens? Not one that we can see or experience. Just so, God's forgiveness, goodness, and love have no limits.

The solidity, the firmness, the unflagging and monumentally dependable presence of the mountains show forth to the inspired psalmist the absolute firmness of God's justice—a Hebrew word connoting truth and faithfulness, utter reliability.

The vast and mysterious power and motion of the sea, so mesmerizing, inviting, and awe-inspiring, are for the psalmist a glimpse of the untiring wisdom of God—his judgments, his will, his attentive and intimate governance of all things.

This is our God. This is the Lord who is always doing his part. This is the bedrock of our faith and the steady assurance that allows us to stumble along joyfully at his side as we make a decent effort to do our part. It starts with him. It always starts with him.



QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What idea in this chapter struck you most and why?
2. When have you experienced personally God's amazing faithfulness? (Remember, consider, and give thanks.)
3. What are some of the factors in your life that keep you from trusting God more fully?
4. Confidence in God can show itself in many different ways throughout the ups and downs of your daily life. It can soften the blows of disappointment or loss, since you know that God loves to work wonders out of weakness. It can fill you with courage to do the right thing, what you know is truly right, even when peer pressure is violently pulling you in the wrong direction, because you know that God's way is always the better way. It can free you to rejoice in the successes of other people, instead of resenting them, because you know that God's love for you doesn't depend on winning competitions. What will you do today to express your confidence in God?

GOD IS FAITHFUL

- I will humbly accept my human limitations by saying “no” to good opportunities or invitations that would require me to overcommit.
- I will simply say a prayer for someone who is struggling and wants to unreasonably draw me into their tangled situation, instead of thinking that it’s up to me to solve everyone’s problems.
- I will visit the grave of a loved one and surrender that person into God’s care once and for all, letting go—through prayer—of the resentment or fear that still accompanies my feelings of loss.
- (Write your own resolution) I will _____

Concluding Prayer

We give you praise, Father most holy, for you are great and you have fashioned all your works in wisdom and in love.

You formed man in your own image and entrusted the whole world to his care, so that in serving you alone, the Creator, he might have dominion over all creatures.

And when through disobedience he had lost your friendship, you did not abandon him to the domain of death.

For you came in mercy to the aid of all, so that those who seek might find you.

—Roman Missal, from Eucharistic Prayer IV