

cs lewis first and second things

The concept of "First and Second Things" is a cornerstone of C.S. Lewis's profound philosophical and theological thought, offering a framework for understanding our relationship with God and the created world. This article delves deeply into what C.S. Lewis meant by "first things" and "second things," exploring their theological significance, practical implications, and enduring relevance for modern readers seeking a more meaningful spiritual life. We will examine how Lewis's insights into these concepts can help us reorient our priorities, find true joy, and navigate the complexities of faith and existence. Prepare to uncover a rich tapestry of ideas that will challenge your perspective and guide you toward a deeper understanding of Lewis's Christian apologetics.

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Unpacking C.S. Lewis's First and Second Things: A Deep Dive

C.S. Lewis, the prolific British writer, theologian, and apologist, provided a powerful lens through which to examine the human condition and our ultimate aspirations. His concept of "first things" and "second things" is not merely

a theoretical construct but a practical guide for living a life aligned with divine purpose and experiencing genuine fulfillment. At its core, this framework addresses the fundamental question of what truly matters, distinguishing between the ultimate Good and the valuable, yet subordinate, tools and experiences that facilitate our journey toward it.

Understanding this distinction is crucial for anyone seeking to live a life of deeper meaning, purpose, and spiritual well-being. Lewis's exploration of these concepts offers a refreshing perspective in a world often preoccupied with the ephemeral and the superficial. This article aims to illuminate the nuances of C.S. Lewis's first and second things, exploring their origins, implications, and practical application for a more intentional and God-centered existence.

Understanding C.S. Lewis's First Things: The Ultimate Good

The term "first things" as used by C.S. Lewis refers to that which is ultimately good, desirable, and worthy of our highest devotion and pursuit. These are not mere preferences or temporary gratifications but are intrinsically valuable, reflecting the very nature of God and His kingdom. Lewis argues that true happiness and fulfillment are found not in the accumulation of worldly possessions or achievements, but in aligning ourselves with these eternal realities.

First things, in Lewis's worldview, represent the divine order and the ultimate telos – the end or purpose – of all creation. They are the "more" that the human heart instinctively yearns for, even when it misidentifies the object of its desire. Recognizing and pursuing these first things is central to a life of authentic faith and flourishing.

The Nature and Characteristics of First Things

C.S. Lewis describes first things as possessing several key characteristics. They are eternal, unchanging, and inherently good. They are not dependent on external validation or circumstances for their value. Instead, their worth is intrinsic and rooted in their connection to God, who is the source of all goodness.

Key characteristics include:

- **Intrinsic Value:** First things are good in and of themselves, not merely as a means to something else.

- **Eternal Nature:** They transcend temporal limitations and are part of God's eternal kingdom.
- **Universality:** They are relevant and accessible to all people, regardless of their background or circumstances.
- **Transformative Power:** Pursuing first things has the capacity to transform our character and worldview.
- **Source of True Joy:** Unlike fleeting pleasures, first things provide deep and lasting satisfaction.

Examples of First Things in Practice

Lewis frequently illustrates his concept of first things through various examples, often highlighting the pursuit of virtues and the cultivation of a right relationship with God. These are not abstract ideals but tangible aspects of a life lived in accordance with divine principles.

Examples of first things include:

- **Love:** Specifically, agape love – selfless, unconditional love, reflecting God's love for humanity.
- **Truth:** The ultimate truth found in God and His Word, which guides our understanding and actions.
- **Justice:** Upholding righteousness and fairness, reflecting God's own character.
- **Mercy and Forgiveness:** Embodying the compassionate nature of God.
- **Faith:** Trust and reliance on God, even when circumstances are uncertain.
- **Hope:** A confident expectation of God's promises and future blessings.
- **Holiness:** A life set apart, dedicated to God and reflecting His character.
- **The Kingdom of God:** Prioritizing God's reign and will in all aspects of life.

The Importance of Prioritizing First Things

The central thesis in Lewis's exploration of first and second things is the critical importance of proper prioritization. He argues that a life devoid of this understanding is prone to chasing after lesser goods, mistaking them for the ultimate fulfillment they are meant to represent. This misplacement of affection and effort leads to a perpetual state of dissatisfaction and a distorted view of reality.

Prioritizing first things is essential for several reasons:

- **Achieving True Fulfillment:** Only the first things can satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart.
- **Avoiding Disillusionment:** Chasing second things as if they were first things inevitably leads to disappointment.
- **Living a Purposeful Life:** Aligning oneself with first things provides a clear sense of purpose and direction.
- **Spiritual Growth:** Focusing on first things fosters a deeper and more authentic relationship with God.
- **Building a Strong Moral Compass:** Understanding what truly matters provides a solid foundation for ethical decision-making.

Understanding C.S. Lewis's Second Things: The Means to an End

In contrast to the intrinsic value of first things, C.S. Lewis defines "second things" as those elements in life that are valuable, important, and even necessary, but only as means to an end. These are the tools, experiences, and earthly blessings that, when properly aligned, can facilitate our pursuit of the first things. They are not inherently bad or to be rejected, but their true worth is realized when they are understood in relation to the ultimate good.

Second things are the instruments through which we can pursue, enjoy, and express the first things. When misidentified as the ultimate goal, however, they lose their proper context and can become idols, leading to a life of misplaced devotion and ultimate disappointment. Lewis's nuanced approach emphasizes that these are not to be despised, but wisely understood and utilized.

The Role and Purpose of Second Things

The primary role of second things is to serve as facilitators for our journey toward the first things. They are the practical aspects of life that enable us to live, grow, and interact with the world and with each other. When viewed correctly, they can enhance our lives and contribute to our well-being, provided they remain subordinate to the divine order.

Their purposes include:

- **Facilitating Life and Sustenance:** Food, shelter, and health are essential for physical existence.
- **Enhancing Experience:** Art, music, and nature can bring joy and beauty.
- **Enabling Ministry and Service:** Talents, resources, and relationships can be used to serve others and God.
- **Providing Opportunities for Growth:** Challenges, learning, and experiences can shape character.
- **Expressing Love and Gratitude:** Gifts and acts of service can be expressions of deeper first things.

Distinguishing Between First and Second Things

The ability to discern between first and second things is a hallmark of wisdom and spiritual maturity, according to Lewis. This discernment involves understanding the ultimate purpose of each element in our lives and ensuring that our affections and efforts are rightly ordered. The key lies in recognizing whether something is an end in itself or a means to a greater end.

The primary distinguishing factor is:

- **Purpose:** First things are ends; second things are means.
- **Source of Value:** First things have intrinsic value; second things have instrumental value.
- **Durability:** First things are eternal; second things are temporal.
- **Capacity for Fulfillment:** Only first things can provide ultimate fulfillment.

For instance, while marriage (a second thing) is a profound and valuable institution that can facilitate love and companionship (first things), it becomes a problematic idol when pursued as the ultimate source of happiness itself, independent of its relationship to God and higher virtues.

The Dangers of Misplacing First and Second Things

Lewis vividly illustrates the detrimental consequences of confusing or reversing the order of first and second things. This is a common human failing, leading to a life characterized by anxiety, dissatisfaction, and a spiritual emptiness. When we elevate second things to the status of first things, we are essentially engaging in a form of idolatry.

The dangers include:

- **Idolatry:** Placing anything other than God at the center of our lives.
- **Disappointment and Frustration:** The inevitable disillusionment that arises when temporal pursuits fail to provide lasting satisfaction.
- **Anxiety and Greed:** An endless pursuit of more possessions, achievements, or experiences, driven by a mistaken belief that they will bring happiness.
- **Loss of True Purpose:** A life adrift without a clear understanding of its ultimate meaning and direction.
- **Spiritual Stagnation:** An inability to grow in faith and pursue the things of God when worldly distractions dominate.

Lewis often used the analogy of a man who, in his hunger, mistakes a door-knocker for a loaf of bread. The door-knocker is a valuable object in itself, but it is the wrong thing to eat when one is hungry. Similarly, worldly pleasures and achievements are good, but they are the wrong things to seek when our deepest hunger is for God and His righteousness.

Applying the Concept of First and Second Things in Daily Life

The practical application of C.S. Lewis's first and second things involves a conscious and ongoing reorientation of our priorities, affections, and actions. It's about cultivating a mindset that constantly evaluates our pursuits in light of their ultimate purpose and their alignment with God's

will.

This application can manifest in several key areas:

- **Spiritual Disciplines:** Dedicating time to prayer, scripture reading, and worship are direct pursuits of first things.
- **Work and Vocation:** Viewing our jobs not just as a means of income (second thing) but as opportunities to serve God and others (first thing).
- **Relationships:** Nurturing relationships with family and friends, recognizing that genuine love and companionship are first things, while the marital state or social interactions are second things that facilitate them.
- **Possessions and Finances:** Using material wealth as a tool for good and generosity (second thing) rather than an end in itself (first thing).
- **Leisure and Recreation:** Engaging in activities that refresh and restore us, but not allowing them to become the sole focus or a substitute for spiritual nourishment.

The process requires consistent self-examination and a reliance on God's grace to help us reorder our lives according to His design.

C.S. Lewis's First and Second Things in Key Works

The concepts of first and second things are woven throughout C.S. Lewis's extensive body of work, appearing in both his theological writings and his imaginative fiction. While not always explicitly labeled as "first" and "second" things, the underlying principle of distinguishing between ultimate realities and their temporal manifestations is a recurring theme.

Key works and their relevance:

- **Mere Christianity:** This foundational work of Christian apologetics explores core Christian doctrines and the concept of God as the ultimate Good, the primary first thing. Lewis discusses virtues and vices, highlighting how misplaced desires for lesser goods lead to moral failure.
- **The Screwtape Letters:** Through the cynical perspective of a demon, Lewis satirically illustrates how worldly desires and distractions (second things) can be used to lead humans away from their ultimate spiritual purpose (first things). The demon's advice often involves elevating

temporal comforts or achievements above eternal truths.

- **The Weight of Glory:** In his sermons and essays, Lewis frequently emphasizes the longing for a divine fulfillment that transcends earthly experiences. He speaks of "joy" as a pointer towards God, the ultimate first thing, and discusses how our earthly pleasures are pale reflections or "second things" that can lead us to Him if properly understood.
- **The Problem of Pain:** Lewis grapples with suffering, suggesting that God often uses pain and hardship to strip away our reliance on lesser goods (second things) and draw us towards Him (the first thing).

These works collectively demonstrate Lewis's consistent articulation of a philosophy that prioritizes the eternal over the temporal, the divine over the earthly, and ultimate reality over its earthly representations.

Conclusion: Embracing the Wisdom of First and Second Things

C.S. Lewis's framework of "first things" and "second things" offers a timeless and practical guide for navigating the complexities of life with wisdom and purpose. By understanding that true fulfillment lies in pursuing the eternal, intrinsic goods – the first things – and by recognizing the secondary, instrumental value of worldly blessings and experiences – the second things – we can reorder our priorities and live lives that are both deeply meaningful and spiritually grounded.

The danger of mistaking the created for the Creator, or the temporal for the eternal, is a pervasive human temptation. Lewis's insights equip us to resist this temptation, fostering a life where our affections are rightly ordered, our desires are purified, and our ultimate allegiance is to God. Embracing the wisdom of first and second things is not merely an intellectual exercise but a transformative way of living, leading to a more authentic relationship with God and a deeper experience of His joy and peace.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the core concept of C.S. Lewis's 'The First and Second Things'?

The central idea of 'The First and Second Things' (often referring to concepts explored in his works like Mere Christianity and The Screwtape

Letters, though not a single titled book) is the distinction between 'First Things' – the ultimate reality, God, and His will – and 'Second Things' – the temporal, material, and earthly desires that often distract us.

How does Lewis connect 'First Things' to Christian life?

Lewis argues that focusing on 'First Things,' namely our relationship with God and living according to His will, is the true path to fulfillment. When we prioritize God, even our 'Second Things' (like work, relationships, and possessions) are put in their proper place and can be enjoyed in a healthier way.

What are some examples of 'Second Things' that can become problematic?

Lewis identifies things like worldly success, comfort, entertainment, reputation, and even good causes pursued without a proper spiritual foundation as potential 'Second Things' that can become idols if prioritized over God, leading to spiritual emptiness or even corruption.

What is the danger of focusing solely on 'Second Things'?

The danger, according to Lewis, is that by chasing after temporal pleasures and achievements without a proper anchor in God, we ultimately find them unsatisfying and can even become enslaved to them. This leads to a life ultimately devoid of true meaning and lasting joy.

How can one practically shift their focus from 'Second Things' to 'First Things'?

Lewis suggests practices like prayer, scripture reading, meditation, community worship, and actively examining our motivations. It involves a conscious and ongoing effort to reorient our desires and priorities towards God and His kingdom.

Does Lewis believe we should abandon all 'Second Things'?

No, Lewis does not advocate for abandoning 'Second Things' entirely. Instead, he emphasizes that they should be pursued in relation to God. When enjoyed as gifts from God and not as ultimate ends in themselves, earthly pleasures and pursuits can be a source of joy and gratitude.

Where in C.S. Lewis's writings can I find more on this theme?

The concepts of 'First and Second Things' are woven throughout many of Lewis's works, particularly in 'Mere Christianity' (especially the chapter 'The Great Sin'), 'The Screwtape Letters,' and his devotional writings like 'The Weight of Glory.'

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to C.S. Lewis's concepts of "First Things" and "Second Things," with short descriptions:

1. Mere Christianity

This foundational work by C.S. Lewis explores the core tenets of Christian belief, arguing for their reasonableness and universality. Lewis presents faith not as blind acceptance but as a rational response to the evidence. It delves into concepts like morality, sin, and redemption, outlining what Lewis considers the fundamental truths of Christianity – the "First Things."

2. The Screwtape Letters

A satirical masterpiece, *The Screwtape Letters* offers a darkly humorous perspective on the spiritual battle from the devil's point of view. Through letters from an experienced demon to his nephew, Lewis illustrates common temptations and the subtle ways evil seeks to corrupt human souls. It highlights the everyday struggles against spiritual decay, which are vital to understanding the "Second Things" of Christian life.

3. The Problem of Pain

In this philosophical treatise, C.S. Lewis tackles the difficult question of suffering and its place in a world created by a benevolent God. He distinguishes between divine pain (used for correction and growth) and the pain of hell (the result of unrepentant sin). Lewis argues that acknowledging and understanding pain is crucial for a proper grasp of God's love and the true nature of reality – the "First Things."

4. Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life

This autobiography recounts C.S. Lewis's spiritual journey from atheism to Christianity. He details his early life, intellectual struggles, and the gradual discovery of a deeper truth that ultimately led him to faith. The book is a personal exploration of the "First Things" that draw individuals towards God.

5. The Abolition of Man

Lewis critiques modern educational philosophies, arguing that they risk destroying the very concept of objective morality. He warns against a future where human nature is entirely manipulated and stripped of its inherent values, leading to the "abolition of man." This work underscores the importance of preserving foundational moral principles, the "First Things."

6. Weight of Glory

This collection of powerful sermons and essays addresses the longing for something more in human existence and the nature of eternal reward. Lewis speaks about the immense, unimaginable glory that awaits believers, a concept rooted in the ultimate "First Things" of God's plan. It inspires readers to focus on eternal realities rather than fleeting worldly pleasures.

7. The Four Loves

C.S. Lewis examines the different kinds of love – Affection, Friendship, Eros, and Charity – and their roles in human life and spiritual growth. He distinguishes between natural loves, which are good but can be corrupted, and divine love (Charity), which is the ultimate expression of God's nature. This exploration of love directly relates to the "Second Things" – how we live out our faith.

8. God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics

This compilation of essays covers a wide range of theological and ethical topics, from the nature of God to the problem of evil and the meaning of life. Lewis tackles these complex issues with characteristic clarity and insight, providing a framework for understanding the fundamental truths of faith. It offers reflections on both the "First Things" and their practical application.

9. Christian Behaviour

Originally published as *Beyond Personality*, this book focuses on the practical outworking of Christian principles in daily life. Lewis addresses issues like humility, forgiveness, and the cultivation of Christian virtues. It's a guide to living out the "Second Things" of faith, demonstrating how to embody Christ's teachings in the mundane aspects of existence.

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