Adjusting your priorities.

Has your spouse told you recently that he or she feels unimportant or unloved because you are involved in so many other pursuits that seem to captivate your time and attention? Do your children declare that you seem distant from them because you have little involvement in their lives? Do the really important issues of life seem to always get sacrificed for things that are of lesser value?

These questions are at the heart of one of the great struggles within any marriage. Simply stated, it’s the issue of priorities; keeping the most important people and things in the proper order in your life. When you fail to determine what your priorities should be and keep these concerns in their correct order conflict will always result. The longer your priorities are off kilter the more your spouse will doubt that any change will occur to improve your relationship. In fact, the people closest to you will feel the furthest from you, because they will believe you care more about other people or other things more than you do about them.

How can you determine what the right priorities should be?

For a Christian, the answer to this question is very easy. If you want to determine what the correct priorities in life should be just search the Scriptures to see what was important to Christ and then follow His example. Jesus obviously had the correct priorities for life. He fulfilled them throughout His ministry even though He didn’t have a lot of time to complete the mission the Father had given Him. Listen to what Jesus said on the night before His crucifixion: “I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do” (John 17:4). In other words, Jesus believed that He had accomplished everything the Father had given Him to do. How did He achieve this goal? As you read through the rest of John seventeen you will understand that Jesus had simply kept His Father’s commandments, which were in reality the Father’s priorities for His life.

Therefore, if you want to make sure you have the correct priorities in your life you must follow Christ’s example. Jesus commanded His disciples, “I have given you an example ... If you know these things, blessed (happy) are you if you do them” (John 13:15; 17). It’s one thing to know what you should do. It’s quite another thing to consistently keep the correct priorities, even though the reward is a blessed and happy life. Don’t you want this happiness in your life?

What happens if your priorities are incorrect?

When your priorities are incorrect God will not be pleased simply because you are refusing to listen to Him and to put His wishes first in your life. Your spouse and children will not be happy either because they will see you loving other things more than you do them. You too will be unhappy because you will be missing out on God’s blessings, which is the only way to have lasting satisfaction in life, instead of the short-term goals you have been following.

Paul also stated that without correct priorities in your life you can’t grow in Christ. Why? Because the Christian life can only be developed by discerning and choosing the things that matter most in life. Notice what Paul prayed: “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent; that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:9-11). If you want to be filled with the fruits of righteousness then you must approve the things that are excellent. The word approve means to discern. The phrase things that are excellent means the things that are better or of more value. Therefore, Paul wanted these believers to discern the things that were of more value for their lives. Doing so would result in their abounding in God’s.

Are your priorities in the right order?

In addition, Jesus made it very clear throughout His ministry what His priorities were and how each of us should follow His example. He addressed the two fundamental categories that encompass all priorities. He taught, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:37-40). The first commandment addressed the vertical relationship between man and God. The second commandment addressed the horizontal relationship with other people. All of your priorities will also fall into these two basic categories.

"She is your companion and your wife by covenant" Mal. 2:14
love, being kept from offensive behavior, and allow them to be filled with the fruits of righteousness. All these blessings would come to their lives because they had set their priorities on what God considered most important.

Paul also told Timothy of the emptiness that would result in his life if he failed to aim at the correct priorities and goals in his life. He explained, “The purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith, from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk” (1 Tim. 1:5-6). The word purpose in this passage literally means goal. In other words, Paul explained that the ultimate goal of all God’s commands is love. This love can only be obtained and maintained in your life by having a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Here is your ultimate goal and the way to reach it. But, is God’s love your ultimate goal? Note also that the words having strayed in this passage mean, having not aimed at. Therefore, if you don’t aim at the ultimate goal of a love relationship with God you won’t reach it. According to Paul, you would also end up with empty religious talk. Empty religious talk means you have spiritual words but no real relationship, all because of having the wrong priorities.

Ask yourself, what are you aiming at in life? What is your ultimate goal? Is it success, material wealth, fun, or some other passing pleasure? If you fail to aim at the correct goal this means your priorities will be off and you will end up with an empty religious experience. You will be going through the motions but without a heart that is full of the love of God and the happiness He wants to give you. In addition, if your heart is empty then you have nothing to give your spouse or your children. Is this what you want out of life? I don’t believe it is or you wouldn’t be reading this article right now. Therefore, if you want to adjust your priorities or be sure they are in their proper order, keep reading.

What should your priorities be?

1. Loving and pleasing God. The most important priority on the vertical plane of your life must be to love and please the Lord. Jesus was most concerned with His love relationship with the Father and glorifying Him throughout His ministry here on earth. Jesus revealed His person-al priority in life when He said of the Father, “I always do those things that please Him” (John 8:29). Pleasing the Father was the ultimate desire in the Savior’s heart and it must be in yours as well. Paul encouraged all believers to make this the ultimate priority when he wrote: “We urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus ... how you ought to walk and to please God” (1 Thess. 4:1). Pleasing God first must be your number one priority. How can you do that?

If you want to please God you must first know Him. When Jesus prayed He acknowledged that knowing the Father is the ultimate purpose of man. Jesus prayed, This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). God wants you to know Him in a personal way and experience His life now and His life for eternity.

Once you know Him personally then you must obey His commands, which will lead you into God’s plan for your life. This is why Jesus commanded His disciples to adjust their priorities so that He might add to their lives all of the blessings He intended. He commanded, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). If Jesus declared that God and His kingdom must be first, then there should be no question in your mind what your first priority should be. The only question is, does God and the kingdom hold this position in your life right now?

What happens if you refuse to put Christ first? If you put something or someone else first trouble is surely ahead. The Lord will never be satisfied with second, third, or last place in your life. He must be your first love (Rev. 2:4).

Most Christians will have no problem agreeing intellectually that Christ must be first, but their behavior, decision-making, and daily choices reveal otherwise. Jesus recognized this contradiction between what we say and do when He said to His disciples, “But, why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). Failing to do what Jesus commands is a clear indicator that He is not first or the Lord of your life.

If you realize that Jesus and His kingdom are not really first, turn right now and ask Him forgiveness and choose to give Him this position. His life and love will begin to flood your soul. Do it now!

Now, let’s turn to the horizontal plane of your life where all the people and responsibilities of your life lie. Which one of these relationships must take the priority?

2. Your spouse. Of all your relationships and responsibilities on the horizontal plane your spouse must hold the first position. This fact is essential to establish right from the start because there are a multitude of relationships that you must juggle throughout your life. There are the pressures of children, parents, friends, ministry, and your job. How can you be sure that your spouse should be first?

To answer this question, consider Christ’s example and what was important to Him. When you do, it becomes abundantly clear that His bride, the church, was His first priority. How do we know this? Because Jesus emphasized many times His care and supreme love for His sheep: He said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Jesus also said to the church, “This is My body which is given for you” (Luke 22:19). “In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2-3). Jesus had the utmost concern for those who were to be His bride.

This is why husbands are commanded to follow His example and are required to sacrificially love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it (Eph. 5:25). And, of course, wives are to love and submit to their husbands with equal self-sacrifice and love. If Jesus put His bride first, then you should also put your spouse first in your heart and in relationship to all others. These exhortations should settle the question of who should be first on the horizontal plane.

However, if you allow your children, mother or father, ministry, job, or hobbies to take this position you are not pleasing God and conflicts will naturally arise with your spouse. Why? Because when your mate looks at your priorities he or she will see that someone or something else is more important to you than your one flesh relationship.
3. Your children. It is obvious that children must take the next position in your order of priorities because the needs of your immediate family are primary. Scripture teaches that we must, “First learn to show piety at home... for this is good and acceptable before God” (1 Tim. 5:4). Our first ministry is to discipline and train our children before we ever try to minister anywhere else. Why? Because our children are the most important disciples in the kingdom of God. The Psalmist declared that God had commanded all fathers to train their children in God’s Word so that, “The generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments” (Ps. 78:5-7). Wives are also called to disciple their children because Solomon included mothers as instructors in the family: “My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother” (Prov. 1:8). If you minister to multitudes and accumulate great possessions and yet fail to do all in your power to win your own children to Christ, what good is it?

4. Your service to the church. Some of you may be wondering why I didn’t title this section Service to the Lord? Let me explain. If you love the Lord and you seek first His kingdom, love your spouse as Christ loved the church, and you are training your children to be His disciples, then you are serving the Lord in a very real and effective way.

However, there are many ministers, elders, deacons, Sunday school directors, and Sunday School teachers that serve the church diligently but have failed to fulfill the first three priorities I’ve discussed in this article. You could be a servant in the church who rarely spends time in personal prayer and study of the Scriptures. You could be a servant of the church and at the same time have a terrible relationship behind closed doors with your spouse or children. However, Jesus always made people and relationships more important than His activities. Jesus would stop everything He was doing to speak with one woman at a well or one individual who touched Him (John 4:5-26; Mark 5:25-34). What an example of priorities is this!

If you are reading this right now and you are serving the church in some capacity and have put that service above your spouse or children, please hear what I am about to say. This can’t go on indefinitely. When your service to the church has a higher priority than those people in your own family, something has to give. Your marriage will suffer and your children will become angry with you. Even your ministry will become hollow because when your home is not in order it’s difficult to minister to others with joy. At the very least you will be unhappy. Your relationship at home must be your priority. This is why Paul made it a requirement that a person’s house be in order before that individual was allowed into church leadership. Paul said that this person should be “One who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?)” (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

After your own house is in order then you may seek a place of service where your gifts can be used for the glory of God. If your own house is not in order and you do not have the support of your spouse, you should adjust your priorities or you should remove yourself from your ministry.

5. Your business or job. The reason your service to the Lord is a higher priority than your job or business is because you are first a citizen of the kingdom of God. Paul declared, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20). However, you will obviously spend more time involved in doing your job or business simply because making a living requires it.

But, many have said to me, “I don’t have time to serve the Lord or go to church or do family things because I’ve got to provide for my family.” I would agree that providing for your family is very important, but when there is never any time left to serve the Lord or be a companion to your spouse or children, then something is wrong. Why am I so sure? Because no one spends every waking minute at work or at their place of business. A person will always allow time for the other things that are important to him or her. If you really have no time for God or your mate then you must be putting these other things as a higher priority. This mistake will only make your marriage and your whole spiritual life unfulfilling and unfruitful. Jesus pointed this out when He described what happens to a person who has his priorities wrong. Notice what Jesus said made a person’s life unfruitful: “The cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful” (Mark 4:19).

Have you allowed other things to choke the life out of your relationship with the Lord or your marriage? If you want a fulfilling life and a marriage that is blessed then you need to change your priorities.
6. Responsibilities in the home. Many conflicts come about in marriage because one or both partners fail to fulfill their responsibilities in the home. This one issue is the subject of many of my counseling sessions. When a spouse is unwilling to help with parenting and discipline of the children, or lend a hand with the chores, or is simply unavailable to help whenever there is a need, resentment naturally builds in the marriage and eventually results in conflict. Why? Because all marriage partners understand that they are a part of a team, which requires each to be a servant to the other. These were the words we pledged when we took our wedding vows. We all promised to love, honor, protect, and serve our mate. To be a servant is to follow the example of Jesus. He said, “Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant” (Matt 20:26). Jesus also said that He didn’t come to be served, but to serve (Matt 20:28).

Is it your desire to be a servant in your home? If it is, then lovingly serve your spouse when you’re asked to help (Gal. 5:13). As you do, your home will be filled with a sense of companionship and love that only increases.

7. Friends. Relationships with people other than your immediate family must always fall still lower on your priority list. This does not mean that friendships are not worthwhile and rewarding for us all. You need good friends. In fact, Scripture teaches that we need “a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24). Good friends like this are hard to find. But, Scripture also teaches that your spouse must be your best friend on the horizontal plane of life. Solomon’s wife said of her husband, “This is my beloved, and this is my friend” (Song 5:16). And of course, on the vertical plane the Lord is your ultimate friend when you feel friendless. Jesus said, “You are my friends” (John 15:15).

However, many individuals tell me that they have a better friendship with someone at work or someone at church then they do with their own spouse. Sometimes this is because your spouse has refused all your attempts to develop friendship. There is not much you can do about this, except pray that their heart would be changed. But, if you realize that you haven’t set your mate as your priority in friendship and you spend more effort and time with someone other than your mate, turn and adjust your priority. Make the effort to do things together, seek out times for conversation, attempt to romance your mate. Many times couples just get lazy in their efforts at friendship. If this is you, reverse direction today.

8. Hobbies. Your recreational time or your pursuit of a hobby will usually be very similar to friends on your priority list because most people pursue their hobbies with their friends and family. But, if your recreational pursuits, or involvement in team sports, or any other hobby take priority over your wife and family, this again will always create strife at home. I’ve seen men who are on two softball teams and are gone 5 or 6 nights a week playing ball, but can’t understand why their wives are upset when they don’t want to be involved on the weekend with the family. However, I’ve also seen wives who are out at church one or two nights a week, then off to a baby shower the next night, then at the gym, and then shopping the following night. This schedule made for very little time at home with her husband and children, which naturally eroded the companionship in her marriage and family.

Does this problem or one of the other issues in this article sound like your situation? If so, prayerfully consider how you can change it.

How can you change?

1. Make a list of your priorities. When couples come in for counseling and they are struggling with their priorities I begin by asking them to make a written list of all their activities. This list helps them to see exactly what they are doing with their time. Then I ask the couple to place this list in order of priority, as they believe it actually is vs. what it should be. This allows me to see if their priorities are in harmony with their own beliefs and with those of the Word of God.

2. Compare your list. The next thing I do is to ask this couple to compare their list with the one I’ve given in the previous section of this publication. If the priorities they’ve listed are in the correct order that’s great. Most of the time they are not. When their priorities are not correct I ask them to make a decision.

3. Make a decision. If the couple or individual is over-committed to different pursuits or over-committing time to these endeavors, they need to decide how they can adjust or remove certain activities from the list completely. There are many things that we give our time to that are good things, but they are not essential and can be very detrimental to the overall health of a marriage and family. These are difficult but necessary decisions to make.

When a couple will adjust their priorities their personal lives and marriage will begin to experience the blessings God intends for their home. I’ve seen people restore harmony to their marriage and relationships by a simple adjustment in how much time is allotted to working at their job, or how much time is spent with friends or recreation. Others I’ve found need a more radical approach because they have become so over-committed to other things that the survival of their marriage is in jeopardy. They must completely remove several items from their list. In other words, you may have to stop playing on that second softball team or not go to that home party to buy kitchenware so you can spend more important time with your spouse or children. You can only slice the pie of your available time into so many pieces.

Remember, James said, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5). May God give you this wisdom to order your priorities aright!

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