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Nothing Is More Important Than Relationships

Relationships are painful. Relationships are wonderful. We all live in the drama that plays out between these two truths.

I think of Neal and Robin when I think of the drama of relationships. Married for only a few years, their life together had started strong. And then, with a suddenness that tore their world apart, Robin suffered a brain hemorrhage. As I sat with Neal in the waiting room on the night it happened, we heard the doctor speak in hushed tones about high-risk surgery and low odds of success. Even if Robin were to survive the surgery, she would likely be in a semiconscious state for the rest of her life. Neal's immediate response was simple faith and sacrificial love. He believed that God had a plan even in this dire circumstance, and Neal was committed to love Robin, no matter what it would take.

Robin survived the surgery, and Neal kept his commitment to love. Day after day, he sat with Robin and spoke to her and nurtured her. Little by little, he loved her to unexpected restoration. Robin learned to speak haltingly and began

to be able to use her hands and arms again. She has even taken a few victorious steps on her own. Almost every weekend at church, there they are—Neal, a shining example of overcoming love, and Robin, a powerful example of overwhelming courage and faith. Robin sometimes wonders just what she can accomplish for God in a wheelchair. The

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truth is, she speaks a life-changing sermon on the power of love by her mere presence. Those who have been involved in Robin's care see her life as a miracle. The greatest miracle, they say, isn't in the healing (they've seen bodies healed before) but in the love. This is the love of a couple who made the choice to continue to love, even in the most crushing of circumstances—Neal having chosen

to practice sacrificial love in a marriage that wasn't close to what he and Robin had dreamed it would be, and Robin having chosen to accept and return Neal's love rather than allowing her own hurt to push him away.

Relationships are filled with both wonder and pain. When I think of the pain of relationships, literally hundreds of pictures flood into my mind from my thirty years as a pastor:

- a couple on the verge of a divorce neither one wants yet both are choosing
- parents who can't get through to their child, no matter how much time, money, and heartache they invest
- a son whose dad has treated him with the cruel contempt of abuse

- a friend whose feeling of betrayal is so deep that she never wants to trust anyone again

When I consider the wonder of relationships, I am equally overwhelmed:

- a marriage no one thought could be restored—but it was
- friendships in a small group that have become the bedrock of life
- a family that would surely fall apart when the pressure of an illness hit—and yet they all came together in the most amazing way

When Jesus came to this earth, he demonstrated that he understands both the wonder and the pain of your relationships. He experienced them both. He came to begin a new relationship with you—a relationship that will strengthen all your relationships. Jesus came to show you how to enjoy a new way of relating to God and to others. For these next forty days, we're going to focus on what Jesus did and what Jesus taught about relationships. Each week, we will focus on one of six basic relationship principles of Jesus.

Where Do We Begin?

We begin our journey with Jesus' teaching about priorities. Here's the truth Jesus taught us: *Nothing is more important than relationships.*

I don't remember the time or the place or the conference, but the question the moderator asked has stuck in my mind. What I recall most vividly is the answer that immediately flashed into my thoughts.

Here is the question:

Suppose you're in a rubber life raft with a friend. You're approaching an island. The raft is leaking, and you are within sight of land. In the raft with you are a set of signal flares, a week's supply of canned food, and a five gallon container of water. You must throw one of these items overboard if you're going to make it to the island. Which one do you choose?

I have to admit, the first answer that hit me was “the friend.”

Now don't sit there with a pious “I've never thought anything like that” look! This silly thought that leaped into my mind was a reminder of how easy it is to value things over people. And who among us hasn't struggled with that feeling?

Priorities become most important when we must make choices. If we had enough time to do everything, everything could be a priority. *But we don't* have enough time to do everything. If we had the power to do every good thing we wanted to do, our choices wouldn't be so important. *But we can't* do every good thing we want to do.

When Jesus spoke about the priority of relationships, he could not have been clearer. He taught that relationships must be given the highest of values—and thankfully he also taught us *how* to give our relationships the highest value.

Experience the Truth

Throughout this book, we will come back again and again to experiences from the life of Jesus. I encourage you to allow these stories from the Gospels to draw you in! These

relationship events from Jesus' life provide an opportunity to learn from *the* relationship expert. Consider what it would have been like to be an eyewitness to the things Jesus taught and did. As you read this experience from the life of Jesus, put yourself there in the crowd with Jesus on that day long ago.

EXPERIENCE THE TRUTH

One of the most noticeable things about Jesus' interactions with others is how people loved to ask him questions. Crowds press in with questions; Jesus' disciples call him aside for questions; and those who disagree with Jesus try to trap him with questions. It's easy to dislike this third group, and it often seems as though Jesus is wasting his time when talking with them. Doesn't he know that their questions are just thinly veiled attempts to trick him into saying something they can use to accuse him? Yet he patiently listens to their questions, and he answers them one by one.

This day the questions are coming fast and furious. One group asks a question about paying taxes; another group launches into a series of questions about marriage. Jesus' answers are brilliant and right to the heart, as always, but it seems that maybe it's time to move on and talk to some who are more open to what he has to say. Then a teacher from the edge of the crowd asks a question with a slightly different tone. There seems to be a genuineness to his question

not heard from the others. He simply asks, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

In Jesus’ answer is the most important statement about relationships you’ll ever hear. As Jesus speaks, he leaves no doubt as to the value he places on relationships:

“The most important [commandment] ... is this: ... ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Based on Mark 12:28 - 34

Jesus’ simple, clear answer to this question has the power to take our breath away. By choosing these two commands as the most important of all of the Old Testament commands, Jesus tells us how deeply he values relationships. He values our relationship with God, and he values our relationships with each other. Lesson one in Jesus’ teaching about relationships is simply this: *Nothing is more important than relationships!*

From beginning to end, nothing is more important than relationships. In the beginning, God created you for relationships. He made you to relate to him and to others. Miss out on relationships, and you’re missing the core reason for which God put you on this planet. And in the end, nothing is more important, because nothing will last longer than relationships. Your relationships with God and others will last all the way into eternity. Jesus knows full well that the

swirling wonder and pain of our relationships tempt us to move them down our priority list. “Who needs this?” we say, and so reduce our lives to simple hobbies, tasks, and entertainments. That’s not the answer! When I try to make less important that which is truly *most* important, it only causes more confusion. A life without relationships may well be a simpler life, but it is also an empty life. The path to the greatest life possible and the greatest joy possible is found in the priority that Jesus taught us to keep at the top of the list: *Place the highest value on relationships.*

DAY ONE

Thinking about My Relationships

Point to Ponder: Place the highest value on relationships.

Verse to Remember: “*The most important [commandment],” answered Jesus, “is this: . . . ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’*” (Mark 12:29–31).

Question to Consider: Have I asked Jesus if what I’m doing is what’s most important?

Tomorrow: The attraction of lesser things