

## **The Two Most Important Things in Life**

### **Part 1**

Mark 12:28-34 (Msg)

Couples who are in difficulty in their relationship quite often end up in counseling. A marriage counselor at some point will recommend a minimum of a date night per week, away from all the distractions of everyday life. The principle is that if you love someone, you need to spend time with them. Usually, in the early years when the romance is hot and heavy you really *want* to spend time with your partner. You can't wait till she gets off work and comes home, and vice versa. Distance courtships where emails and phone calls are not enough, dissolve in passionate embraces when you get together.

But, as the relationship grows and evolves, as economic factors weigh in, and maybe as children arrive, less and less time is spent together. The "I love you, can't get enough of you" factor seems to diminish. Sometimes we act as if we've forgotten where the attraction was at the beginning. At the end of the day you tumble into bed, exhausted, and those caresses that used to mean so much are forgotten, and the terms of endearment have dissolved into a weary "good night", ...and that is if you actually turn in together at the same time.

Do you actually love your partner less? If asked, you would probably say "of course not." Are you acting as if you love less? Probably. For those actively involved in a relationship, this scenario feels all too true. But even if your lover, companion, partner or friend has left, or has died, you can still remember the heat at the offset and the cooling off as time wore on, and the need to *work* at making the relationship a good one. I hope you did.

Too often these days when the first bump occurs, we abandon the love bus and go looking for a new relationship, one where no work is required, one where the sparks and fire of newness can get us going again. But, for those who do wish to work at it, and receive the rewards of making it work, counseling is usually helpful. You get to see yourselves in the mirror of trained eyes, a reflection that shows you where you're going wrong, and what you can do to correct it.

Perhaps you've heard the story that Nicky Gumble tells about this couple who had been married for 50 some years, but who were always arguing. If Pa said "black" Ma said "white." If Ma said "yes, that's the way it is" Pa said "no, it's not that way at all." (ad infinitum, ad nauseum!) It was uncomfortable to be around their negative nattering,

and their children and grandchildren were really getting fed up with being subjected to this depressing atmosphere every time they visited. So they decided on giving the argumentative couple a gift certificate to a renowned psychologist who specialized in geriatric counseling. After much disagreement, the elderly couple decided to cooperate.

On their first visit they argued about what time they should be there, how they should get there, where they should sit in the waiting room. Throughout the first session it was Pa saying “this is what’s happening” and Ma saying “no, it isn’t that way at all.” (ad infinitum, ad nauseum). This continued session after session until the last appointment when the counselor said:

“Well folks, ... I have decided on what it is you need”. And, defying all his training in professional ethics and decorum, he walked around the desk, and planted a big healthy kiss on Ma’s lips. He said “This is what your wife needs, three times a week.” Pa replied immediately:

“What days should I bring her back, then?”

Pa was being asked to *show* his life companion that he loved her.

In our Scripture lesson today Jesus is telling us there really two important things in life. A Jewish scholar, who was all too familiar with the Ten Commandments and the six hundred and thirteen additional Levitical laws, set Jesus up with asking Him “Which is most important of all the commandments?”

Jesus answered, referring back to Old Testament Scripture (Deut. 6:4,5) which the scholar would have recognized:

“The first in importance is, Listen ... The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.”

Mark 12: 29,30 Msg

But how on earth do you love God? God is a Spirit. Many of us think we “love God” by serving Him, by how we look after His creation, His people in need. We’ll deal with that more next week, in the second most important thing in life. In the lineup of “passion, prayer, intelligence and energy” the latter, “energy,” might refer to service. Or as a more traditional translation says: “You must love him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength” - the “strength” allusion may be to “what you do.” But since that is the second most important thing, it really doesn’t tell us what the first important thing looks like. We can’t rely on the physical communication, the touch, the caress, the kiss. But we can communicate at the deepest level of who we are.

Let’s go back to the principle “if you love someone, you need to spend time with them.” Sort of a “date night” with God, or if you’re a morning person, a “date morning” or if you’re a young mother and you have to wait till the kids get off to school, a “date mid-morning”. But, it is an intentional time when you get together with your Lover, “your spiritual Lover”, to share time. Sometimes it is time in silence, just listening for the voice of your Beloved. Sometimes it is reading the Bible. Sometimes it is sharing your

deepest concerns at an intense heart-wrenching level. It is what Lovers do. They listen, they talk, they share, and in so doing touch each others' hearts.

We try to have staff retreat days a couple of times a year. Usually we will have a scheduled program from nine in the morning with sticky cinnamon buns and tea and coffee, then a planned program of worship, singing, Bible reading followed by exercises in team building. For our Spring Retreat just a couple of weeks ago, Pastor Kim had the idea that we should all spend the morning separately, nine till noon, only with God. Just schedule those three hours as time spent with God, however each individual felt comfortable. To be honest, I wondered how it would work. I was personally looking forward to it, because many times I feel that my morning devotions are cut too short because I need to "report for duty" to the bricks and mortar of our ministry.

This way, we all had license to spend that entire time in communion with God, however we felt comfortable. As it turned out, some went walking, some spent some of the time on the treadmill, or their favourite chair, away from the household turmoil. Others listened to their favourite meditative music and others read devotional material. We all reported for lunch at noon at my place, "retreat central" and then we started the afternoon by journaling about our morning with God, and then we shared with each other what we had experienced.

Wow! It was amazing! Everyone had received messages from God during that period of time, some of them very deep and profound. Some of them digging into the very roots of people's fears and pointing out direction that needs to be taken. I, of course, can't share anyone else's. but I can share mine. I wrote in the special Journal that Kim had purchased for each of us:

"The dominant theme of my morning was an overwhelming sense that all will be well – all will be truly well – both personally, and at church. I felt at first that *I* was too much the focus of the meditation, then realized that what was happening was really an assurance that all would be well in this coming transition". ... (then there were several paragraphs in a message that was directed specifically to me, which I shared that day with the team.) The journal entry continued:

"Then I was reminded of a conversation with Bob Bayles where I felt inspired to say that 'God hasn't brought us this far to dump, or to desert us.' God has the right person in the wings and is preparing him or her. I believe *our* job is to stay true to our calling, and God will do the rest.

We have been called to minister to the ones that Jesus would have gravitated to had He been here in the flesh in this time and place. So it will be with the *Spirit* of Jesus. All will be well. We can't go back.

The days ahead are going to be good. We don't know how. We don't know the timing, the players – in our church, in our lives – but God does, and will reveal and orchestrate everything in His own time and in His own way. We all need to shed those

things that hold us back. I need to let go of the framework that has been so satisfying and safe. I need to fly without a net and rely on God for my security.”

That very special morning with God, and that amazing afternoon of sharing with my team-mates and having them, each one, share their God-moments with me, were powerful. And you know something? It probably wouldn't have happened if there had not been a designated priority, and permission given to spend time – loving, and being loved by the Creator of the Universe, present, communicating clearly through the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit.

I wonder how many times God says “I have something to say to you. You need to know this ...” and we haven't been anywhere near enough, open enough, took time enough to hear what it is. Our lives are filled with so many legitimate “things”, busyness that keeps us distracted till tiredness takes over. and another day has passed without having spent time, intentional time, with Someone who wants to be top priority in our lives.

Reminiscent of C.S. Lewis' Screw Tape letters, our Board Chair, last Tuesday read about a Convention that Satan had conducted. In his opening address to his evil angels, he said, "We can't keep Christians from going to church. But we can do something else. We can keep them from forming an intimate, abiding relationship experience in Christ. If they gain that connection with Jesus, our power over them is broken. So let them go to church, let them have their Christian lifestyles, but steal their time, so they can't gain that experience in Jesus Christ. This is what I want you to do, angels. Distract them from gaining meaningful contact with their Saviour and maintaining that vital connection throughout their day!"

"How shall we do this?" shouted his evil angels.

"Keep them busy in the nonessentials of life and invent unnumbered schemes to occupy their minds" he answered. "Tempt them to spend, spend, spend then borrow, borrow, borrow. Convince everyone to go to work for long hours, to work six or seven days a week, ten to twelve hours a day so they can afford their lifestyles. Keep them from spending time with their children. Over-stimulate their minds so that they cannot hear God's still small voice. Entice them to play the radio or CD player whenever they drive, to keep the TV, DVD's, CD's and their PC's going constantly in their homes. And see to it that every store and restaurant, elevator and car radio in the world plays distracting music constantly. Generate lots of white noise. This will jam their minds and break that union with Christ.

Fill their coffee tables with magazines and newspapers. Pound their minds with news 24 hours a day. Invade their driving moments with billboards. Flood their mailboxes with junk mail, sweepstakes, mail order catalogues, and every kind of

newsletter and promotion, offering free products, services and false hopes. Even in their recreation, let them be excessive. Have them return from their recreation exhausted, disquieted, and unprepared for the coming week. Don't let them go out in nature to reflect on God's wonders. Send them to amusement parks, sporting events, concerts and movies instead. And when they meet for spiritual fellowship, involve them in gossip and small talk so that they leave with troubled consciences and unsettled emotion."

It was quite a convention in the end. And the evil angels went eagerly to their assignments causing Christians everywhere to get busy, busy, busy and rush here and there. Has the devil been successful at his schemes? You be the judge.<sup>i</sup>

In each one of our lives, we have the opportunity to get our priorities straight. It's hard. There are so many demands on our time. I watched a replay of Flip Wilson on the Ed Sullivan Show a couple of days ago, the one where he launched the phrase "the devil made me do it." You know, where the wife is explaining to her distraught husband why she is coming home with her purchase of a third dress in the same week. (Look it up on You Tube. It's hilarious).

But ...I'm not sure we can totally blame the devil for our lack of time in what Jesus said should be our highest priority, the most important thing in life: loving God with all our hearts, soul, mind and strength. But I do know.... if you love someone, you need to spend time with them. It can't be any other way.

When we first met Jesus, and fell in love, and decided that our life was going to be given totally to Him, it was exciting. No prodding was necessary for us to spend time with Him. Maybe now, though, we need some counseling. Maybe we need to be reminded about "date night" or "date morning" and intentionally take back the time, and spend it daily with God. How else are we going to follow *Jesus'* prioritizing of *our* life plan when He said: "The first commandment in importance is, Listen ... The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy." Mark 12: 29,30 Msg Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from an entry on March 8, 2011 from [www.dailydevotionals.com](http://www.dailydevotionals.com)