

Looking Ahead: Focusing on Priorities We Pursue

Matthew 6:26-33

Video Clip: Rocks, Pebbles, Sand Story

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5ZvL4as2y0n>

In this series *Gaining A Fresh Perspective on Relationships*, the next key concept is focusing on the priorities we pursue in life. In order to fill the container (your life) to the maximum and have good relationships along the way, you must put the big rocks in first.

Many of you will remember the 1974 song, “Cats in the Cradle” by Harry Chapin. This heartbreaking song tells of a father and son who can’t schedule time to be with each other, and it serves as a warning for us about our priorities.

So, what are the big rocks we need to make sure are the top priority in life? What is truly the most important? Each of you will need to determine this for yourself but I’d like to share what that I think are top five big rocks.

Big Rock One:

In the late 19th century John Wanamaker opened a department store in Philadelphia. Within a few years that enterprise had become one of the most successful businesses in the country. But operating his store wasn’t Wanamaker’s only responsibility. He was also named Postmaster General of the United States, and he served as superintendent for what was then the largest Sunday school in the world at Bethany Presbyterian Church. When someone asked him how he could hold all those positions at once, he explained. “Early in life I read, ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.’ The Sunday school is my business, all the rest are the things.”¹

When Jesus was asked about the number one priority in life, His answer was crystal clear. He summed it up in two words: “Seek first”. That’s it!

“Seek first his kingdom” that is God’s, and God’s ways and you won’t have to worry about the rest.

Now, “notice there is a responsibility and a promise. Seeking God is our responsibility. We can’t control many aspects of our lives, but we can choose to seek the Lord. The stock market may soar and dip like a roller coaster. Our jobs may flourish and then flounder. Our families might encourage us one day and infuriate us the next. Our spouses may treat us kindly sometimes and terribly at others. But through the highs and lows, we have a choice to seek God’s daily.”ⁱⁱ

There was a story in the *Our Daily Bread* devotion booklet a while back about a noted young concert violinist who was asked the secret of her success. “Planned neglect,” she replied. Then she explained, “Years ago I discovered that there were many things demanding my time. After washing breakfast dishes, I made my bed, straightened my room, dusted the furniture, and did a host of other chores. I then turned my attention to violin practice. That system, however, failed to accomplish the desired results. So I realized I had to reverse things. I deliberately set aside everything else until my practice period ended. That program of planned neglect accounts for my success!” (Our Daily Bread) She recognized that she had to start with the big rock before adding in the gravel and sand or there wouldn’t be adequate room for the big rock.

I find that for myself I need to be in worship every week and I have to start my morning with doing a daily devotion. I have tried other patterns. Sometimes I say, “Well, I’ve got to take care of this thing first, and then I’ll come back and do my devotions.” NEVER happens. I never get back to them. Plus, I find my day and my week much more centered, focused on God and God’s purposes when I begin the day with God. I also find, I’m a whole lot less stressed out when my life is built on the solid foundation of the rock of ages.

Now, some of you, I know, are disciplined enough to do devotions at other times of the day—even Jesus was—but for most of us, it’s

morning or never. First things first in life and first things first each week and each day.

This is so much more than just putting it first on your daily to do list. The imperative *seek* in the present tense could be translated “consistently seek.” We are to consistently seek God, pursue God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. When we do so, God promises to reward us with “*everything we need*”

Big Rock Two: Marriage

The second big rock won’t necessarily apply to everyone in this room. But, for those of you who are married, the second big rock needs to be your marriage.

How do you make your **marriage** a top priority? In the book *Red Hot Monogamy*, authors Bill and Pam Farrell suggest that couples need T.I.M.E. It is an acronym.

- T stands for 10-15 minutes each day to connect – to stay in touch with each other, a daily touch point to share
 - Appreciations
 - Check your assumptions
 - Complaints with recommendations for change
 - new information
 - prayer needs
 - hopes/dreamsⁱⁱⁱ
- I stands for investing in a weekly date night (yes weekly and aiming for at least 4 hours together because you need that much time for intimacy to build)
- M stands for a monthly day together 8 to 10 hours with each other
- E stands for escape quarterly at least bi-annually

Big Rock Three: Children

As I reflect back on my life and think about my relationship with my parents, what made me feel loved, connect, special and cared for, wasn’t the stuff they bought me, or the trips we took, my fondest memories are of our family eating dinner together around the kitchen table. Still today, when we are together, that’s my

favorite part because it is around the table that we share life together. We talk about what's going on in our lives, our hopes, our dreams, our fears and our needs.

But what I see today – even wrestle with it in my own household – there are so many opportunities to take advantage of that in our jar of life, we begin to fill our lives with sand and gravel and we don't have room/time for the big rocks – relationships.

One of the most simple things you can do to make your children a priority is to eat dinner together as a family. Most American families are starved for time to spend together, and dinner may be the only time of the day when we can reconnect, leaving behind our individual pursuits like playing video games, emailing and doing homework. Dinner is a time to relax, recharge, laugh, tell stories and catch up on the day's ups and downs, while developing a sense of who we are as a family.

Over the past 15 years researchers have confirmed that sharing a family meal is good for the spirit, the brain and the health of all family members. Recent studies link regular family dinners with many behaviors that parents pray for: lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy and depression, as well as higher grade-point averages and self-esteem. Studies also indicate that dinner conversation is a more potent vocabulary-booster than reading, and the stories told around the kitchen table help our children build resilience. The icing on the cake is that regular family meals also lower the rates of obesity and eating disorders in children and adolescents. What else can families do that takes only about an hour a day and packs such a punch?

So, put the phones down, turn the tv off, reduce the number of outside “sand” your involved in, gather around the table and get to know your family. My grandson taught me something I thought was pretty awesome, at home they share “high, medium, and lows.” They go around the table and every one shares a high point, medium and low point of their day. You might also consider doing a family devotion after you eat – that was another favorite of mine growing up! Pick a reading from the kids story bible, or get a

devotion book from the church library or check out the thriving family website for some great online resources. CBD has a very inexpensive “101 family meal-time devotions” short, one page devotions with some questions for conversation around the dinner table.

The research shows families who eat dinner together five nights a week reap great benefits.

A second great way to connect with your kids is to tuck them into bed at night and pray with them. Many years ago, I worked a couple nights a month as a nanny for a young widow. She had three kids and a job that required her to be away from home 2-3 nights a month. It was during those nights that I would meet the kids after school, do the homework, dinner and bedtime routines. When it was bedtime, all the kids would get their pajamas on, brush their teeth and crawl into bed. Then start with the youngest one, I would follow the mom’s routine – reading a book to him, then praying together. The child offering prayers first and then mom would add to it, tuck him in and kiss him goodnight. Then she moved on to each of the other kids who were reading their own books until she came in. They prayed together and she would tuck them in and kiss them good night. I was only with these kids a couple times a month but those moments were truly special. It’s amazing how much you can connect in 10-15 minutes with your children.

Making your kids a priority doesn’t involve major things – it is often the most simple – spending time together as a family that will make the biggest difference.

Big Rock Four: Health and Well-being

This may sound a bit funny in a conversation about relationships, but I think the next big rock is taking care of the body God gave you. I’m not always so good at this one, but I’m trying to do better because I realize that when I eat healthier, when I am more active and sleep better – it improves my relationships.

Along with caring for our physical bodies, we also need to care for our emotional and mental well-being and that includes guarding our schedules. We need to make sure we have margin in our lives – there is a reason God urges us to observe a Sabbath day – it is time for rest and relaxation. When we allow margin, we are a whole lot less stressed out because there is room for the unexpected and room to do some of the things we enjoy.

A couple years ago, Jeff's bible study group did a lesson called Good, Better, Best. There are a lot of good things that we can take advantage of but if we try to do it all, we'll drive ourselves nuts and it will take a toll on our health and our relationships. So, we need to narrow down the things we say yes to - not just those that are better, but what is truly best for ourselves, our families, our relationships.

Big Rock Five: Work/School

In our gospel reading today, Jesus said don't worry about everything, God knows what you need. God has given us the ability to work. In many cases, it is through our work that we receive compensation that provides for our needs and plenty for us to share with those who don't have enough. I could almost argue that work is gravel but in our Lutheran theology, our work is a way we participate in God's grace in the world. Luther calls it our vocation – whether you are an employee, employer, a housewife, or a student – our vocation is a way we live as followers of Jesus and share grace with others. Students, your vocation at this time is to go to school and to learn, to gain the knowledge and skills you will need for your future work.

Now, I have included this as my 5th big rock, but we need to be cautious with this last one, because sometimes we allow it to be more important than the other 4. Yes, we should do our work well but not to the detriment of our families.

For me, these are the five big rocks that are the most important in building and having healthy relationships in our lives. When we have these rocks in place in our lives, it gives space for the other things to fit in around them. But if we start with the sand and

gravel in our lives, there won't be adequate room for these big things.

If I could urge you to do anything – seek God continually and spend time with your family. Let go of the non-essentials and focus on the Big Rocks that are truly important.

ⁱ “Seek First the Kin-dom of God” Oak Grove Presbyterian Church Matthew chapter 6 Bill Chadwick Sunday, August 12, 2012

<http://www.oakgrv.org/Sermons/2012%20Sermons/08.12.12.sermon.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Swindoll, Charles R. *Gaining A Fresh Perspective: Seeing Relationships through New Eyes. Insight for Living, 2002. Pg 29*

ⁱⁱⁱ Marks, Richard and Louella. “Enriched Christian Marriage: Making “US” A Reality” participant guide page 13.