

Your Spouse is More Important Than Work

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It seems like this conversation happened just yesterday, but it actually happened before Cathy and I had kids. I was a youth pastor at a thriving church and one night after a great youth group meeting we went to get something to eat. Cathy's lip began to quiver. Even though we had been married only couple of years, I knew the "quivering lip thing" was not good. She blurted out, "Jim, I'm not sure we should have children." "What do you mean, Cathy? We talked about our love and desire to have kids on our first date!" She said, "I know. But you are so busy with your work and everyone else's kids, I just don't know if you would be present in our kid's lives." She went on to say, "You are always working!"

I felt like she had stabbed me in the gut with her words. What's worse, I knew she was right. I loved my work. I loved everything about my job and more than that, it was successful. My low self-esteem needs were being met by a growing youth ministry and a church that loved us. At the same time, I knew in my heart I was working too many hours and it was affecting my relationship with Cathy and that my work would eventually affect my relationship with our children. I looked her in the eyes and said, "I'm having an affair!" The affair **was not** with another woman. The affair was with my work and that affair was stealing much of my focus and attention on Cathy. I had to admit that Cathy was only getting my emotional scraps. I was giving my best to my work and there wasn't much left over for her.

I don't know about you, but I have struggled all my adult life with "confused priorities." And yet, I could tell you what the right priorities should be, even though I had trouble living them out. Most of the people I know would say that their priorities should be:

- God - Marriage (if married) - Children (if they have children) - Vocation

Of course, the list goes on. The problem is that we constantly get our priorities muddled up. Because I'm in ministry, there have been many times I've gotten my vocation mixed up with my relationship with God. When we finally did have children, we found it easy to fall into the trap of having a child-focused marriage even though we knew that a child-focused marriage often helps kids become entitled, believing they are the center of the universe, not to mention a lack of connection with your spouse in most child-focused marriages.

I'm not telling anyone their work isn't important. I'm just saying that work is not more important than family. I've never heard anyone say toward the end of their life, "I should have worked more hours." I've heard many key leaders say, "If I would change anything, I would have spent more quality time with my family."

Are you giving your family only your emotional scraps? If you don't know the answer, just ask your family. They will tell you. Many years ago, I was speaking at the Promise Keepers Pastors' Conference at Arizona Diamondback Stadium. One of my heroes in the world of ministry, Jack Hayford, was the MC for the event. Right before I went on to speak, we were able to spend some time together. I asked him, "Jack, what is the secret to your leadership success?" Jack was one of the key leaders in the evangelical Christian movement this century. Jack thought for a moment and said, "Jim, it's not what I have chosen to do that has helped me, but rather what I have chosen NOT to do. I've had to say no to some very good things to say yes to the most important things." I asked, "What are those things?" This amazing international leader said, "I've needed to say yes to my wife, children and grandchildren. Not only are they a gift from God, but they are my most important relationships besides God." That day Jack taught me this principle: *The key is not to prioritize your schedule but to schedule your priorities.* This will always ensure that your family gets your best attention.