

The Gift of Presence

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It is that time of year when countless numbers of expectant children and 'young at heart' adults, get excited at the prospect of the Christmas presents they will receive. However, long after the novelty of those gifts have faded, what will be remembered most will be the precious gift of our presence.

The Apostle Paul admonishes us, "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8). While Paul speaks within the context of supplying material needs, the passage has a wider application. This passage is one of several in the Bible which teach that the way we relate to one another is an accurate barometer of our relationship with God. In addition to the basic necessities of life required for our physical wellbeing, our families have legitimate spiritual and emotional needs that cry out for attention.

Giving this due attention involves an investment of time, and how we choose to spend our time is an accurate measure of the things we value the most. Our families must be prioritised. Otherwise, quality time will be swallowed up by the increasing demands of making ends meet, doing taxi service for the children, fulfilling church responsibilities etc. etc. etc. Because our time is so limited, it needs to be budgeted in the same way that our limited finances require responsible allocation. Time that is not budgeted tends to fall victim to the tyranny of the urgent, or flow in the direction of our weaknesses. Stephen Covey made the profound observation that, "No one ever said on their deathbed, 'I wish I spent more time at the office.'" The greatest regrets in life are often the failure to cultivate our most important relationships.

When God says, "Therefore shall a man leave father and mother and cleave to his wife," this represents a shift in relational priorities. But this shift is not only limited to the time we give to our parents in relation to our spouse. The principle also includes the prioritisation of our relationships with those we choose to call family. As Christians there can be a tendency to neglect our families because we are, "about our Father's business." However, our order of priority should be "God, family, church", not "God, church, family".

Ellen White emphasises this when she states, "Men and women, children and youth are measured in the scales of heaven in accordance with that which they reveal in their home life" (Sons & Daughters of God, 255). In regard to family responsibilities we are also counselled that, "If he [husband] is engaged in business which almost wholly closes the door of usefulness to his family, he should seek other employment" (The Adventist Home, 221). Second only to our relationship with God, meeting the needs of our families should be our top priority.

Making time for each other is not just about spending time in each other's physical presence. Proximity and togetherness are not the same thing. Proximity has to do with location, while the gift of presence has to do with an intimate heart

connection, doing things together, taking time to listen to one another and showing genuine interest. Quality time involves giving undivided individual attention in a way that communicates care and value. Again, we are urged, “. . . spend as much time as possible with your children. Seek to become acquainted with their various dispositions, that you may know how to train them in harmony with the word of God (The Adventist Home, 222).

Christmas, we are told, is all about giving. God Himself has demonstrated the ultimate gift, “For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16). Our gift of presence to one another should be a reflection of the greatest gift of presence, “Emmanuel, God with us” (Matthew 1:23).