
Relationships at the Center of the Target

More than thirty years ago I (Tom) was introduced to an idea that profoundly affected the way I look at Scripture. Wendell Broom, a professor of missions at a Christian university, pointed out that many people look at the will of God as revealed in Scripture and see it like a set of dominoes where everything in God's will is the same size and the same weight. (Ignore the numbers on the blocks and just see the dimensions of the blocks themselves in Figure 1.)

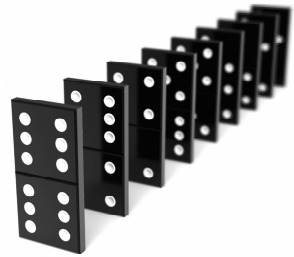


Figure 1

So in their minds, to give one example, the issue of a deacon's qualifications or what type of music to use in worship would be the same weight as something like justice and mercy. The reasoning is that anything related to God is just as important as anything else related to God. Not unexpectedly, such an approach often leads to endless controversies over smaller details.

However, Broom pointed out that when Jesus looked at God's will, he did not see it like a set of dominoes as much as he saw it like a target (Figure 2). With Jesus, certain things were dead center

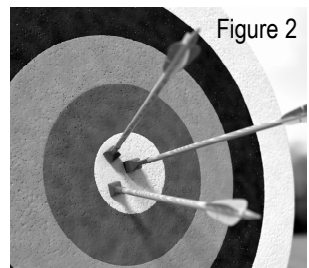


Figure 2

or more central than others. Other issues were still within Scripture and within the will of God, but were more peripheral rings.

Where did the professor get this idea? From Matthew 23 where Jesus says,

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”
(Matthew 23:23–24)

The tithe the Pharisees focused on was found in Scripture, but it clearly was not among what Jesus calls “the more important matters.” By neglecting “the weightier matters” (KJV)—the center of the target—and focusing on lesser matters that were easier to keep track of and handle legalistically, they ended up with a great distortion of what God had planned for his people.

While Scripture does not spell out for us what is in the second ring and the third ring, it does make very clear in various ways what things are in the center of the target. Jesus goes on to teach that we should not neglect any of God’s will (v23), but he is clear that any practice that omits “the more important matters”—the center of the target—can never bring honor to God.

CENTRALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

In this book we are affirming that relationships in the body of Christ—and particularly the nature of those relationships—are not in some peripheral area. They are to be found at the center of the target, at the heart of what the kingdom is all about. If

we have any interest in being faithful to God and in being a serious disciple of Jesus Christ in this world, the nature of our relationships with other Christians must be of primary concern. As the kingdom breaks into our present age and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, there will be a remarkable difference in kingdom relationships, and seeing to this must be a passion of disciples.

Understanding that this conclusion is not something that should just be assumed, let us look carefully at different places in Scripture where the centrality of relationships is made clear.

1. Matthew 22:37–40

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

With Jesus speaking here about the greatest of the commandments, there can be little doubt that we are at the center of the target. Certainly nothing is more in that place than loving God with all one's being. No amount of church activity or even study of Scripture can ever substitute for a personal love for God that permeates every area of life, conversation and practice.

But then Jesus says, "The second is like it." There is a second commandment. It is second, but it is not far behind. It is almost out of his mouth in the same breath. And it is so closely akin to the first, in just how essential and vital it is, that Jesus had to connect the two. What was it? "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus makes it clear that relationship with others is intricately tied in with relationship with God.

“All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments,” Jesus says. For the Jew he could not have been clearer. For them, the Law and the Prophets encompassed all of God’s will, and Jesus is saying, in the words of The Message Bible, “These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from them.”

But if this passage introduces us to and lays the foundation for the idea that relationships are at the center of God’s will, this message will be underscored more specifically in something Jesus said later just to his disciples.

2. **John 13:34–35**

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

How had Jesus loved them? Graciously, unconditionally, sacrificially, honestly (not holding back any truth they needed) and humbly, as their servant (note just a few verses earlier). Now he commands them to love one another just as they have seen and known him to love them. While we are not left to surmise or guess what this means (as many other NT teachings will spell it out for us), if this were the only statement we had to go on, we could develop a rather thorough picture of the kind of relationships Christians ought to have with one another. And if it were the only statement we had, we certainly would have no doubt about how crucial it is for us to develop and practice such an understanding.

This, Jesus says, is the way all men will know we are his disciples. Remarkable! This is so near the center of the target that it will be the distinctive mark by which Christians will be recog-

nized as truly his. We are not in peripheral territory here. Correct doctrine is important, but Jesus does not say, “Men will know you are my disciples by your doctrine.” Inspirational assemblies have an important place, but Jesus does not say, “These will convince others that you are mine.”

The prophet Isaiah 700 years before Christ looked forward and saw the coming kingdom where disputes would be settled and people would beat their swords (tools of division) into plowshares (tools of peace) (Isaiah 2:4). There would be the seemingly impossible unity of the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the calf and the lion—all being led by a little child (Isaiah 11:6–9). Men would protect each other and be for one another a shelter from the wind (Isaiah 32:2). As those in Jesus’ church practice his love in their relationships with one another, others will see evidence that the messianic kingdom has come.

Why does Jesus not say something like, “All men will know you are my disciples, when they see your prayer life or your devotion to Scripture”? While we cannot be sure, an educated guess would be that men can pray (Matthew 6:5) and study the Scriptures (Matthew 22:29) for self-serving purposes. But when you see men and women laying down their lives for one another, it looks like Jesus (John 3:16 and 1 John 3:16) and what the Spirit through Isaiah anticipated. Relationships among believers are part of the “more important things” because Jesus clearly put them there.

3. Acts 2:42

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Here we have a description of the first group of believers fol-

lowing the baptism of three thousand on the Day of Pentecost. Luke makes it clear that the apostles, trained by Jesus, were leading these new disciples. As they closely adhered (*proskartereo*—“devoted themselves”) to what the apostles taught them, they devoted themselves to “the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Certainly, the second practice followed the first. What they heard from the apostles in all likelihood was what the apostles had heard from Jesus as recorded in John 13:34–35. Their repentance and turning to Jesus was to be lived out in loving others who had also committed themselves to follow him.

But perhaps we see this more specifically when we look closely at this word “fellowship.” The word in Greek is *koinonia*. Whereas today the word “fellowship” might bring to mind casual conversation or other lightweight associations, the word *koinonia* referred to much more—to partnership and deep involvement. The word was used outside the New Testament to describe marriage. The New English Bible may best capture the essence of the word with the phrase “sharing together in the common life.” *Koinonia* has its root in the word *koinon* which means “common” or “in common.” People who experience *koinonia* share a common life—not a casual connection.

This is not the garden club, the poker group or even the Rotary Club we are talking about. This is family, but in another sense, even deeper than normal family. This is the connection of people who are related because they have been baptized into the name of Jesus, born of the Spirit and share the deepest identity, values and goals.

The apostles took seriously what Jesus had taught them and made this commitment to one another a primary teaching for new converts. From day one there was never any question that sharing life together was at the center of the target.

4. Galatians 6:1–2

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

This passage is the first reference we mention that comes from the NT letters. In many ways the sheer volume of material in the letters about relationships is itself a strong argument for the centrality of relationships in God's plan for his people. A close examination might reveal that the letters deal with relationships more than any other subject. In view of what we have looked at already, this is not surprising.

Here and in several other texts, Scripture shows how central our relationships are to new life in Christ. As we often hear that the three key words in real estate are "location, location, location," perhaps we need to understand that the three key words in biblical study are "context, context, context." The phrase in verse 2 "carry each other's burdens" should be looked at first in context before other applications are made. In applying this approach, we see that the "burdens" are burdens produced by sin. Christians are to be so involved in each other's lives that they know what sins others are struggling to overcome. Then they are to actually come alongside others and help them carry those burdens to a place where they are dealt with.

The statement, "In this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ," is an interesting one. "Law" in the New Testament does not always refer to a commandment or a code, but often to a "principle" (see Romans 7:21 and 8:2 for examples). Thus it would seem that helping your brother or sister to overcome a sin is a fulfillment of the principle of Christ. When we consider that the

burden Jesus carried for us was our sin (Isaiah 53:4–6, 1 Peter 2:24), this conclusion makes good sense.

So relationships are at the center of God’s will because it is in these relationships, that are anything but superficial, where we are fulfilling the very principle of Christ. We are following in his steps—not just by being a nice person who donates money or gives a ride to the doctor—but by being so involved in the lives of others that we are able to help them bear the burden of sin.

5. Philippians 1:27, 2:1–4

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel. (Philippians 1:27)

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:1–4)

We expect that many will read the phrase “a manner worthy of the gospel” and think it refers to being moral, reading the Bible, attending church or having a sweet spirit. However, again, we must pay careful attention to the context. In these verses that follow, “the life worthy of the gospel” is described as standing

firm in one spirit while having a deep unity with each other (1:27) and having a deep involvement in each other's concerns (2:4).

The life that is worthy of the gospel is a life that shows the gospel at work in our relationships. The same point is made in the letter to the Ephesians. Paul begins chapter 4, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." What is the rest of the chapter about? Relationships. Particularly notice the two verses that follow his admonition:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (4:2–3)

It is as though Paul is consistently echoing in his letters what Jesus said in John 13:34–35 (though John had not yet recorded these words in writing, they no doubt were well known).

Relationships are at the center of God's will because this is the way you live a life worthy of the gospel and of the Lord.

6. 1 John 1:7–9

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

In the letter of 1 John a great contrast is drawn between living in the light and living in the darkness. But what does it mean to "walk in the light"? Again consider the context. We would

argue that it is parallel to verse nine and that “walking in the light” and “confessing our sins” are what someone has called the Siamese twins of 1 John.

Walking in the light is living our lives with openness and transparency in response to the blood of Christ. Fellowship (*koinonia*) is so important because it is both the practice and the product of walking in the light and living in the light—light that is produced by the cross of Christ.

So how central are our relationships to following Jesus?

1. Coupled with loving God.
2. How we show we are disciples.
3. Something to be devoted to as we come into Christ.
4. How we fulfill the principle of Christ.
5. How we live a life worthy of the gospel and the Lord.
6. Where walking in the light leads.

Whenever you think: “I need to get serious about my relationship with God,” do you immediately realize that means, “I have got to get serious about my relationships with other believers”? We have not included all the material we could have examined, but these key texts show us that there is no doubt that God sees relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ at the center of the target.

Make no mistake, none of this is arbitrary. Everything about God’s plan is purposeful. We were made for relationships. The very nature of God is at stake here. There is one God, but he is Father and Son and Holy Spirit—by nature there is relationship. Jesus makes that abundantly clear throughout the gospel of John (for example see 3:35, 5:19–20, 14:26, 17:2).

How can we ignore the centrality of our relationships as we

worship and serve a God who in his very nature demonstrates relationships to us? They are the fulfillment of the kingdom of God in the midst of human culture. We find richness in life not in gadgets, cars or houses, but in relationships—first with God and then with one another. But not only do we find fullness, but we find transformation, which we will see as we move on.

Making It Real

1. How does a relationship with God go hand in hand with relationships with each other? In other words, how does the first lead to the second, and how does the second have impact on the first?
2. Look back to the answers you wrote down after the Introduction. In light of what was discussed here in chapter 1, what thoughts do you have about these questions and your answers? What action do you want to take?
3. If you do not see yourself as a relationship person naturally, what changes in your thinking do you need to be open to making?
4. What responsibility do the ideas in this chapter give us regarding our friends who believe they have a good relationship with God without deep connection to other people? Do you think you know such people?