Matters of Urgency and Importance

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33)."

Though I don't intentionally eavesdrop on people's conversations, I recently overheard an exchange between a little boy and his mother passing through the door at Ralph's. I didn't hear the context, but the toddler innocently asked his all-wise mother the meaning of a word:

"Mommy, what does 'urgent' mean?"

She lovingly replied, "Urgent is something that's not just important, but really, really, REALLY, SUPER IMPORTANT!"

I pondered her words as I peeled off to the Produce section. Her answer seemed reasonable. Urgent things can be very important; they may even be matters of life and death such as a fire alarm, or Code Blue in a hospital.

Yet do urgency and importance invariably go hand in hand? After all, just because something demands immediate attention doesn't necessarily mean it's important. Take the telephone, for example, an invention with urgency built into it. Most phones are loud and shrill, drawing attention to anyone within earshot and interrupting all ongoing activities. Moreover, the rings are limited, and each is followed by a heavy pause that in effect cries out, "Answer me, now! Only three more, two, one--last chance!" Though we miss an interaction if we don't reach the phone in time, all it takes is one solicitation from a telemarketer to know that all phone calls definitely aren't important. A call from a friend is important, whether urgent or not. Yet a telemarketer's entreaty, though often feigning urgency or importance is rarely either.

It would be nice to discern the importance of calls at the time the phone rings. Like in the old Batman TV series where Commissioner Gordon used the red "Batphone" only for vitally important matters, say when the Joker or Catwoman threatened to destroy Gotham City or planet Earth. Now most of us don't have the luxury of a Batphone (although this term is used in business for a private number reserved for high priority calls). Rather, the next best thing might be caller ID. While it's helpful to know who calls, we don't get why until we've answered, and possibly interrupted something *more* important in the process. Of course owning a phone at all means we sign up for its interruptions; furthermore it's hard not to satisfy our curiosity about who and what awaits us on the other end of the line.

Whether important or not, just about any phone call is arguably a better use of time than other admittedly frivolous activities with "urgency" that I've allowed to influence the attention I pay them. Like the popular computer game Farmville on Facebook. In recent months I've fallen prey to planting, harvesting and maintaining an electronic farm. As well as helping out with my neighbors' electronic farms. Sure it's only a game, but the threat of withered computerized plants intentionally imparts a sense of urgency that draws my attention as if it were more important than it really is.

However, though few would seriously argue that a computer game merits significance in the grand scheme of life, there are other "somewhat important" endeavors I've deemed "really important" simply because they cry out for attention. Such as undone chores around the house. Not only might I overrate their importance because of perceived urgency, in the worst-case scenario they can exact a toll at the expense of something truly important, like honoring my husband. If he's talking to me and I fail to listen because I'm distracted by some task, my actions communicate that the task is more worthy of my attention than he is. It doesn't matter that the task is good; what matters is that it's not what is best at the moment, i.e., listening to him. Therefore, when I choose "good" over "best," my misplace priorities unwittingly place something good at odds with the best. "The way that seems right but that leads to destruction (Proverbs 16:25)" may very well include choosing urgent but not-so-important matters over non-urgent, important ones.

On the other hand, what's best in God's sight doesn't always ring out with loud urgent cries. Clothing ourselves with a quiet and gentle spirit (1 Peter 3:4) is supremely important, as is our quiet time with God. But how many times might we become scantily clad in godly spiritual clothing when distracted by matters of urgency, like Martha (Luke 10:38-42)? Worried and upset, her anxiety stemmed from the noble effort of serving guests. In contrast, the same good thing didn't overtake the best for her sister Mary. Commended by Jesus, Mary fixed her attention at His feet and placed the best ahead of the good task that wreaked emotional havoc with Martha.

Yet God's best for us certainly can include matters of urgency. Such as situations of fervent, effective prayer of the righteous (James 5:16), or fervent service to the Lord in spirit (Romans 12:11), or fervent love for one another (1 Peter 4:8). In some instances we should act, NOW, while at others we wait. The Israelites waited many years in bondage to Egypt, but once God's deliverance was at hand, their exodus and cross through the Red Sea became urgent and demanded immediate action. Therefore we're wise not only knowing what to do, but when to do it.

Life under heaven includes timing to all of God's purposes (Ecclesiastes 3:1). For some the time is now, while for others a hope may be deferred. Still, at any moment we can always choose His best, the part that can never be taken from us. However, if the lesser part is chosen instead, it not only can be parted from us, but it can also tear us apart.

Though many good things may come, only the best overcomes.

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