

Quietness comes first from the heart that is fully satisfied in Christ, then it flows out from the heart to the other spheres. De-cluttering one's life is something that occurs because one is already content in Jesus. It's a response born out of a desire to eliminate the distractions and idols that inhibit our abiding in Christ so we are helped in our remaining faithful in each of the various covenant spheres of life.

This display of substantial, healthy, loving faithfulness in each of these areas is the beauty of holiness for the individual. Likewise, the mutual encouragement, exhortation, and practice of holding one another accountable toward loving faithfulness in these spheres is the beauty of holiness *for the church*.

#### The Spheres of Covenant Faithfulness

Let's consider for a moment the various "spheres" of covenantal responsibility in which we are called to remain faithful as we live and move. To be sure, these realms cannot be so cleanly subdivided and neatly packaged into tidy, compartmentalized experiences or parts of our day—as though there was separately a God part, a spouse part, a portion for our children, two hours for church on Sunday morning, an isolated experience for work that never saw intrusion by family responsibility (nor did work ever infringe on family time), and so on.

Rather, as we all know, we move through these various spheres throughout the day as they overlap and are intertwined in this experience we call "life." But make no mistake, these various covenantal spheres do really exist for us as expressed in Scripture, and how we prioritize our time and heart life is fully in view with the arrangement of these spheres.

As described above, they are interdependent upon one another, with each sphere unavoidably impacting others for good or ill. For, as surely as we cannot isolate them entirely, we likewise cannot negatively or positively influence one sphere without the consequences spilling out into other spheres for better or for worse. Or, to put this in terms of the language we've been using

thus far in the book, we cannot separate the being and doing sides of life—in any area, at any time. (I don't enter the workplace and cease to possess all of my "husbandly" or "fatherly" responsibilities any more than I cease to actually be a husband or father merely by virtue of being physically located apart from my wife and children.) The same organic, overlapping, commingled approach we find in the way Scripture is woven together is exactly the same experience we find in how we move through this life and the various relationships for which we are responsible covenantally.

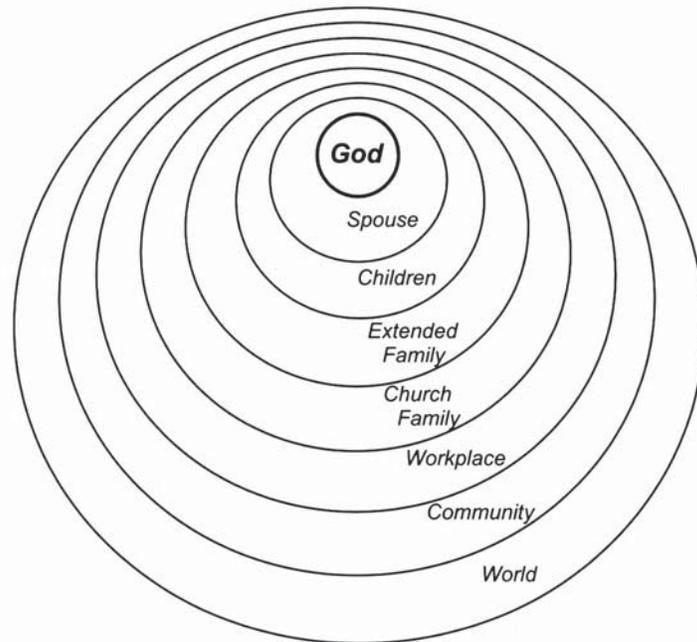
That said, throughout the cannon of Scripture, God places emphasis to one degree or another on various covenant relationships and underscores our accountability for them. In this way, these covenantal spheres can be arranged visually as a series of widening circles, like ripples moving outward from a stone cast upon on the smooth surface of a lake (see *illustration next page*).

At the center we find, paramount to all others, our relationship with God—the Creator, Savior, and indwelling Holy Spirit. Positionally, this relationship lies at the core of everything we are, everything we do, and everyone else with whom we are in relationship. All genuine love, the wellspring of the good we do, originates in God, through faith in Him, to His glory (Matt. 22:37- 40; John 15:1-8; Acts 17:28; 1 John 4:7-8). Living and demonstrating this love through dependence on Christ is the essence of what it means to be image-bearers.

Our relationship with our spouse occupies the next sphere. After the Lord, the relationship we have with our wife or husband is to be cherished above all others (Eph. 5:22-33). We are to guard it, nourish it, champion it—and in time of trial or duress, to nurture, mend, and affirm our marriage relationship. For, it stands alone in Scripture among human relationships as "joined by God," as holy, and as the very metaphor for Christ's relationship to the church (Matt. 19:3-9; Heb. 13:4; Eph. 5:22-32).

The next sphere finds our relationship with our children (natural and adopted) and any other members of our household for whom we are responsible (Josh. 24:15; Acts 16:31-34; 1 Tim. 3:4,12).

YOU ARE MINISTERS



*Spheres of Covenant Faithfulness*

Extended family occupies the next sphere. Here, we find our relationships with siblings, parents, grandparents, and so on. In some circumstances, extended family members may be living within the same household as you and your immediate family, in which case they would occupy the same sphere of covenantal responsibility.

#### **From Within the Household to Without**

Whether our relatives are living under our roof or a thousand miles away, Scripture makes clear the expectation that as Christians we are to provide for them if they are alone and unable to care for themselves, especially in the twilight of their years. Writing to young Timothy, Paul says that he who neglects this responsibility "has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:4, 8). Even here—with extended relatives who may very well be unbelievers—we find God dealing with us covenantally and holding us responsible both to know these expectations and to walk in them faithfully. This is faith expressing itself through love (Gal. 5:6). And where unbelieving extended family members are concerned, self-sacrificing love in action is the greatest evangelistic tool in the toolbox.

Beyond our immediate and extended family, we find the covenant sphere of church family (Gal. 6:10). In the sphere of church relationships, there's a profound (and ultimately spiritual) dynamic that is at work among the faithful, having been adopted by God into his household of households and engrafted into the body of Christ. Those who pursue heart-level relationships with their brothers and sisters in Christ—deeply knowing them, being known by them, and speaking the truth in love—begin to experience the blessings of authentic life, the realization of Christ's vision for oneness and intimacy in the body of Christ as it grows up in His powerful love through these relationships.

These are the mutually constructive covenantal relationships we are called by God to have with one another, building one another up in love—and which we have been discussing up to this point in the book. These are the in-the-trenches, rubber-meets-the-

road, in-the-middle-of-life relationships where we are transparent, sharing real hurts, real needs, real struggles, real victories—where we enter into the messy details of one another's lives, holding out the Word of life, the gospel of Christ, to apply it as the only remedy that can truly meet our deep-soul needs. Here, we are fed on the Bread of Life, and we drink from the Wellspring of Living Water—Jesus Christ.

Conversely, this is why casual, surface-level, recreational Christian (or non-Christian) friendships that go just an inch deep and never deeper are not only ultimately disappointing and unsatisfying as replacements for heart-level relationships—but are also spiritually harmful. How easy it is in under these circumstances, where we are not being regularly and lovingly held accountable in our covenant spheres, to allow responsibilities at work or other interests to crowd out these primary relationships and the responsibilities associated with them, to press in and rob us of covenant faithfulness, of victory in living holy lives as we are sanctified, and of the joy of bringing glory to God.

In the outermost rings, we find the spheres of this world through which Christians sojourn as aliens and strangers—the spheres of workplace (Eph. 6:6-9), community (Luke 10:25-37), and the rest of the world (Matt. 28:18-19). If we are pursuing mutually constructive covenantal relationships within our homes and churches, then the outermost spheres are significantly (even primarily) evangelistic in nature. Much could be said here. But for our purposes, I will limit my comments to simply drawing your attention to the basic principles communicated in Scripture.

Within these outermost spheres, believers are expected to not only work to provide for our families (1 Tim. 5:8; 2 Thess. 3:6-13; Eph. 4:28), but also to be responsible as citizens (Rom. 13), to remain conscientious to the needs of those around us (Gal. 6:10; Matt. 5:43-48), and to be salt and light to others as we sojourn through this wilderness to our heavenly Sabbath home (Matt. 5:13-16; 1 Pet. 2:11-12). We should keep in mind that we are to make the gospel attractive by the godliness of our lives (1 Thess. 4:11-12; Titus 2:7-10), which involves importantly our love for one

another as believers living in covenantal community (1 Pet. 3:1-2; John 13:34-35). In fact, it could be said that this very life of loving, hope-filled community is the best advertisement for the gospel, our witness in the world (1 Pet. 3:15).

### **The Covenant Spheres as a Fountain of Life Ever-Flowing**

As we start at the center of our relationships (that is, with God) and move outward through these spheres, it should come as no surprise that the degree to which we find success in being faithful in each covenant sphere is directly proportional to the degree to which we are filling up with Christ to begin with. In this way, think of the spheres as a fountain.

Look again at the illustration and imagine now that you are looking down upon the top of a multi-tiered fountain, with the "God" layer at the top and the "world" at the bottom. Imagine the spheres as the consecutive layers of this fountain, with water spilling from top to bottom, cascading from level to level, filling up and overflowing at each tier.

This fountain of covenant faithfulness has running up through the center of it a pipe called faith, which carries the precious water of life: the love and grace of the Lord Jesus, flowing through us as we abide in him and he in us (Eph. 2:6-10; Col. 2:9-10; Phil. 1:9-11; 2 Pet. 1:1-8; 1 John 4:7-5:6). It is only when we begin here, with the love and grace of God filling us up and overflowing from us, that we can ever hope to remain faithful in our human covenantal relationships, to the glory of God our Savior (2 Cor. 9:6-11).

Moreover, notice the beauty of this outward flow now through the rest of spheres. As we abide in Christ, filling up in him and overflowing to our spouse, loving and serving not out of duty but the desire to cherish and beautify, the marriage grows stronger and each is mutually encouraged in their faith in Christ (Eccl. 4:11-12; Eph. 5:22-33).

As husband and wife encourage and build one another up through Christ in the marriage relationship, communicating with one another on a heart level, then the more prepared we are jointly

as parents (filling up and overflowing) to turn now and instruct our children and those in our household in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4), without exasperating or provoking them (Col. 3:21), and training them in the milieu—faithfully recognizing heart-training opportunities as they come along in the middle of life (Deut. 6:6-7) rather than seeing them as distractions, frustrations, and obstacles to our comfort or to our private agendas.

For as long as we are parents, training our children's hearts through the trials of everyday life *is our agenda*, and Christ himself is our source of rest and wisdom in that agenda. Further, as we instruct, discipline, and encourage our children in the Lord, knowing them on a heart level, they are prepared to hear God's call upon their life. And as we in turn begin to disciple them, training them to know their own heart and apply the gospel to it, they are nourished in their faith in Christ—growing in their private devotional life and learning to walk independently with God (Prov. 22:6, Titus 1:6, Col. 3:20). What's more, our children become a delight, producing in their lives the fragrant aroma of Christ as they grow to display the fruit of the Spirit and abound in the peaceable fruit of righteousness (2 Cor. 2:15; Gal. 5:22; Phil. 1:11; Col. 1:10; Heb. 12:11).

The household that is unified in purpose (glorifying God and serving others) and in power (through Christ's indwelling Spirit) is fully prepared (filling up and overflowing) to reach outward now to extended family and church family in acts of service and ministry.

When households like these gather as the church (as a household of households) to worship and serve, speaking the truth in love, building one another up in love, what a mighty work indeed is God able to do through such ready vessels. Instead of activities which fragment the family, and classes that merely inform the mind, and programs that distract us from deep-heart needs, we find the whole body, whole households, whole hearts—wholly engaged in the worship of Christ and the beautification of the bride.

*You Are to Be Faithful Stewards*

In churches such as these, evangelism becomes not just another outreach program or scheduled activity, but the natural outflow of the church (filling up and overflowing) into our workplaces, our communities, and out into the rest of the world. And what a message we now have, what good news indeed!

We bring more than a one-sided message of justification, but the entire gospel message of salvation: justification, sanctification, glorification in the hereafter; life-transforming grace, reconciliation between God and man, the hope for and the means of peace in relationship with God, with our spouse and children, and with our extended family—and deep, purposeful friendships with fellow believers, wherein we lovingly come alongside, helping and exhorting one another to live covenantally faithful lives unto God and others to the glory of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now, that's something to want to tell others about—in our workplace, in our community, and to the ends of the earth!

**Remaining Faithful in Our Covenant Spheres**

We find it consistently expressed in Scripture that the beauty of holiness is reflected in the loving faithfulness of godly individuals in godly homes and godly churches. When the New Testament church was being established, exhortations to faithfulness to Christ were common. Acts 11:23 recounts, "When [Barnabas] came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose." Jesus tells the church of Smyrna in Revelation 2:10, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. ... Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."

The consequences, however, for failure to remain steadfast in our faithfulness are serious, as the Lord declared to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 28:47-48, "Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in na

kedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you."

Let's be sure here: faithfulness is more than surface-level, unexamined, behavioral duty. It is more than simply doing the right thing to fulfill one's obligations. Even the Pharisees had that practice mastered. No, faithfulness is *joyfully* approaching our God-given duties, since indeed joy itself is a duty (Phil. 4:4; Psalm 37:4; John Piper's *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*).

We cannot obey God fully if we do not serve him joyfully—that is, we must seek our happiness in God and in the welfare of others through him. And the standard set for us is that we do this in every area of our lives, even when faced with hardship and adversity, as Paul commends the Macedonians: "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part" (2 Cor. 8:1-2).

This expectation to serve the Lord and others joyfully even in the face of adversity is not impossible, but it is not easy nor does it come naturally. Take, for example, a young wife who knows she must love, submit to, and serve her husband—and who starts out happy to do so—only to find herself living with a functionally unbelieving husband who is mistreating her and neglecting her. Now, what formerly came as "easy" seems nearly impossible. She feels strongly compelled to retreat in fear and avoid her duty to love and submit to him cheerfully.

Or take the example of the man who knows that being faithful means taking the time to shepherd his family and lead them spiritually, but instead of seeking the Lord's direction, he succumbs to inward, personal judgments of inadequacy and fear as a spiritual leader in his home. Now instead of serving in joy, he either avoids the responsibility altogether or his efforts become rooted in a sense of obligation. Any attempts to lead originate from a fear that if he did otherwise he most certainly wouldn't measure up to perceived expectations, thus incurring negative consequences and making

life even harder. Under these circumstances, it simply seems easier to quit trying.

Faithfulness is continuing to do what God requires even when it becomes *really difficult* to do so. As Paul exhorted young Timothy, "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:3). This world is indeed a wilderness of temptation, trial, and trouble that can make it difficult to stay to the faithful path. But, it was never intended that we stand alone. The beauty of holiness, expressed in the loving faithfulness of the saints, is intended by God to be a community project—we are to each be about the building up of one another in love through mutually constructive covenantal relationships (Eph. 4:15-16), pursuing together covenant faithfulness in every area, in every sphere of our lives—exhorting, encouraging, and holding one another accountable to faithfulness in each of these areas lest we succumb to temptation in any one of them.

#### **Resisting Temptation to Leave the Path**

My family has a favorite vacation spot at a house in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Orange County, Virginia. One of the things we enjoy doing while on vacation there is hiking to White Oak Canyon Falls in neighboring Madison County. It's a very pleasant, peaceful hike: a couple miles up to the falls over the rocky but very well-trod terrain of the popular trail not far from Grave's Mountain. Arrival at the falls is always enjoyable and inspiring—majestic, white water cascading over the rocks, receding into a crystal clear pool.

On a recent visit to White Oak Canyon Falls, we cooled off from the hike with a wonderful time of swimming in the refreshing mountain waters at the base of the falls. Afterward, we packed up and began the scenic journey back. Along the way, we came across the expected wildlife—as well as some not-so-expected wildlife, when a black bear stepped out onto the path just ahead of us, lumbering toward us casually.