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CHAPTER ONE



Priorities: First Things First

Parenting: the toughest job you'll ever love. The task of hands-on parenting lasts for approximately eighteen years, at which point you move from the role of supervisor to that of consultant. Oh, you are always Mom or Dad, but you are no longer involved in daily parenting tasks. And I probably should tell you that, although you are a consultant, you will not be getting paid like one. The shift in responsibilities comes little by little, moving toward the goal of working yourself out of a job.

Many of the choices you make in the early years of parenting have lasting effects. The investment of time and energy that you make in your child can bring both of you joy or sorrow well into the future! Eighteen years may end the parenting responsibilities, but not the relationship.

Let's Make a Plan

With a task this important, a good plan is in order. We all want to know where to go and how to get there. Let's start at the beginning—not by looking at our differences as Mom and Dad, but by examining the things we have in common, our core beliefs.

“Those who
plan what is good find
love and faithfulness.”

(PROVERBS 14:22)

It is true that my husband, John, and I are very different—different genders, different personalities, different “baggage,” different traditions—but despite all of those things, we have the most important fundamentals in common. Our core beliefs are the same. First and foremost, both of us have come to a saving knowledge of Christ . . . at different times and in different ways (of course!), but both of us have arrived at the foot of the cross.

John's Journey

John's journey began at an early age. From infancy through high school he faithfully attended Sunday school and church with his family, hardly ever missing a Sunday. Perfect attendance, however, while admirable, is not a guarantee of a relationship with Christ. That important commitment came when John was sixteen years old. An evangelist was speaking at the little church where John and his family attended, and on the last night of the revival, John went forward to the altar and prayed for forgiveness. That night his heart was changed and he began to seek the Lord and what God had for him.

I think it's safe to say that although that particular evening was monumental for the church, as many people did precisely what John had done, there was no one to disciple and teach those who had made this recent and life-changing decision. So John headed forward on his journey of life knowing that God loved him and that he had been given the gift of eternal life, but knowing very little about the Word of God.

My journey looked nothing like his.

Kendra's Commitment

A few years passed and I came on the scene. We met at the public swimming pool in the town where I lived. I was enrolled in senior life-saving and John accompanied his older brother, our instructor, to help with the final test. He came to the pool on the day that we were scheduled to “rescue the victim!” When I saw how cute he was, I immediately made the decision to get into *his* line. When I saw that all the other girls had the same idea, I simply got into his line first.

I was immediately infatuated with John. The afternoon after our

somewhat unusual introduction, I actually told my best friend, Jane, that I thought I had just met the man I would someday marry. Now remember, this was *not* a prophetic statement. This was not based on anything but my human attraction for him. I had done no praying or seeking God's will on the matter, because neither of those behaviors was a part of my life at that time.

We began to date, unaware that the Bible specifically instructs believers (John, in this case) not to be "unequally yoked" with an unbeliever. He was not being overtly disobedient. Instead he was simply oblivious to the instruction of God. After four years, the innocent prediction I had made to Jane came to pass and we were married. We became "yoked"—unequally. John had made a commitment to Christ. I had not. I am certain the inequality contributed to that nasty little interchange I told about in the introduction, which happened shortly after we became husband and wife.

But things did change, and the change occurred soon after our wedding day. John was scheduled to report for pilot training at Big Spring Air Force Base, Texas, about a week after we were married. So we had that honeymoon John had been looking forward to and then we drove to Texas.

I can still remember John waking me up when we got to Texarkana. "Kendra," he said. "We're in Texas now. You might want to stay awake." In our excitement we failed to realize that arriving in Texarkana, more than nine hours into our journey, meant that we were *almost* halfway to Big Spring. Texas is a very large state!

Life in Texas

Ultimately we did reach the Air Force base and John began the adventure of pilot training for the United States Air Force. We got married after I completed my second year of college, so the plan was for me to enroll in college wherever we were stationed. The plan, however, did not come to pass. Big Spring was one of the few bases with no four-year college close by. That seemed to ruin my plans. John's response was that he knew we were "where God wanted us to be."

My thoughts were not as faith-filled. *God? Why does He care where we are stationed? And if He did really care, why didn't He put us near a*

college? It didn't make any sense to me. Of course it didn't. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (1 Cor. 1:18).

Our different perspectives on location were just one example of how my unbelieving heart was different from John's believing heart. The illustrations mounted daily until finally I became overwhelmed. John's behavior was driving me crazy. He wasn't doing things the way I thought he should. Instead he was at peace in the various challenges. His "annoying" behavior is specifically noted in Scripture. Galatians 5:22–23 says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." That's how he was responding, and I finally confronted him about it.

"I don't know why you are so content and I am so miserable . . ." I began. Before I could continue, he interrupted me with a thought.

"It just might be that I have accepted Christ as my Savior and I'm not sure you have done that," he said gently.

Just *might*? Not *sure*? There was that kindness and gentleness thing again. He must have known.

But I truly wanted to hear and embrace the Good News of Jesus. I had been seeking the truth since I was a teenager, but had never heard it from someone I knew, loved, and trusted. John was the perfect person to share the gospel with me. He had been "encouraging and comforting" me (1 Thess. 2:12) for several years and now was well qualified to "urge me" just as the Scripture instructs.

"Well, let's get on with it!" I said emphatically. I knew that I wanted what John had. We prayed and my life has never been the same.

I'll be forever grateful . . .

. . . that we don't have to wait to come to Christ until we are good enough.

. . . that we don't have to wait until we are smart enough.

. . . that John lived out his love of Christ so that I could see it and desire it.

Our core beliefs are the same now, and that is what is most important. We have one other thing we agree completely on (admittedly maybe *only* one other thing). We agree on our list of priorities.

Busy, Busy, Busy

The world is a busy place. Many things clamor for your time and attention. Your kids need you. Your spouse needs you. Your job needs you. Your own parents may need you. And, of course, your church needs you. Just going through that list has worn me out. Everyone needs us. The question is, “What comes first?” That is the age-old question of priorities.

I heard about establishing my priorities when I was in college. I was told that in order to get the most important things accomplished, I’d have to set my priorities. Years later I heard motivational speakers say the same thing. And I read books that encouraged me to make a list of the things I deemed important. All this input had me convinced. *Just do it!* I thought. So I prayed and made a list of the things I thought were important—in order of their importance. I constructed a list of my priorities. This list resided in a place of honor—on the right-hand corner of the desk where I could see it every day. But being able to see my list of priorities didn’t change my life. Seeing the list and having it affect my life were two different things.

Motivation for Change

My list of priorities took up space and gathered dust on the corner of my desk until several things happened that motivated me to action. As I spoke around the country, I told anecdotes about my children. In the early years I heard the same comment from more than one older woman. . . . “Oh honey,” the woman would say, “enjoy those boys. They’ll be gone before you know it!” The recommendation was always expressed with a tone of sadness. I imagined her next words to be “Because, you see, I didn’t and now mine are gone! Enjoy those boys. Make them a priority.”

Not a bad idea. And something else pushed me in the direction of making my list of priorities actually influence my behavior.

The Oldly-weds

It was a beautiful day in July and a large crowd had gathered to celebrate my in-laws’ fortieth wedding anniversary. We had a wonderful

dinner and then invited several couples to play the “Oldly-wed Game.” The premise of this game was identical to the Newlywed Game with one obvious difference—length of marital commitment. Deep into the competition, the wives had exited the room and the husbands were asked to complete this sentence: “My wife’s favorite saying is _____.” I’ll never forget the answer of one of the contestants. “That’s easy,” he said. “My wife’s favorite saying is ‘Hurry up!’” Needless to say, this answer did not match his wife’s!

That question and answer from the game got me thinking. How would *my* husband answer that same question? How would my children? “My mom’s favorite saying is ‘Hurry up!’ or ‘I’m too busy!’” Yikes! I didn’t want either of those sayings to be classified as my favorite or to be featured on my tombstone. My family needed to know by my words and actions that they were a high priority.

Not a bad idea. A good motivator. The most powerful and poignant motivator, however, was yet to come.

No Regrets

One more thing, something much more serious, pushed me to take a long look at implementing the list of priorities into my life. I am the youngest of three children. My brother and sister were both in college by the time I was in third grade. But even with this age gap, my sister and I became friends as adults when we lived within driving distance of each other. My sister’s husband, one of my favorite people, was also my dentist.

One day while we were visiting them, he told me he had been having difficulty making extractions. I never realized that it took a certain amount of strength to pull a tooth. Like a typical male, he wasn’t even thinking of going to the doctor. Instead he increased his workout schedule. At forty-five years old, he was actually in very good shape. Weeks later, when his aggressive physical fitness plan didn’t make a difference, he went to see his doctor.

Immediately the physician declared the problem to be much more serious than anyone realized. My brother-in-law had an MRI and it was determined that he had a brain tumor. Within days he was scheduled for brain surgery.

I was sitting in the ICU waiting room with my sister when the doctor came in after surgery. “We removed some of the tumor from the brain,” he said. “We were not able to get the entire mass, however, and it was definitely cancerous. I doubt if he will recover enough to undergo chemotherapy or radiation.”

We sat in that waiting room in shock. Over the next few weeks, I went to the hospital to be with my sister and brother-in-law almost every other day. It was more than an hour’s drive and I had three young children, but with the help of John’s family and our church family, I was able to spend time away.

The conversations with my brother-in-law were difficult. My visits were more of a monologue than a dialogue. I read to him and prayed for him and told him funny stories. My brother-in-law, my sister’s husband, my friend, was dying. Because his words were few and far between, they had great impact. One day when I had been in his room for several hours, he turned his head toward me and spoke words I hope I’ll never forget. “Oh Sister,” he said, “I should have gone fishing more.” Those words shouted at me. It was one of the last things he said to me. I needed to consider more seriously my list of priorities.

Not a bad idea!

His words, and his death only days later, were a reminder to me that my list was doing me no good perched on the corner of my desk. It was high time to put that list into action to change my behavior. I wanted to be certain to “enjoy those boys!” I wanted my legacy to be more than efficiency, multitasking, and being in a hurry. And I wanted to be certain I had done what was important in my short time on earth. I didn’t want to voice any dying regrets.

So I began more earnestly to pursue the answer to the priority puzzle: How can my “list” be reflected in my life?

Not long after that, I had a thought while I was cleaning the bathtub . . . a job that takes very little attention to detail. I had been thinking about the whole idea of my list of priorities making a difference. I’m pretty sure that the idea was from God because it lined up with His Word and was bigger than any thought I could have had on my own.

My Watercolor Priorities

I had always made my list of priorities on paper with pen or pencil. My idea was this . . . what if I took my paper and put it upright on an easel? And what if instead of a pen or pencil, I painted my priorities with watercolor?

Those of you familiar with watercolor painting are shaking your heads. “This won’t work. Watercolor paint will run. You’ve got to have the paper flat.” You’re right—right at least about the fact that the watercolors will run to the bottom of the paper. But that was the whole point of the thought I had that day.

Picture this. Priority #1, “The Lord,” was written in purple at the top of the sheet of paper. No sooner had my brush left the paper than the dripping paint from the letters I had written began their slow and steady descent to the bottom.

Then I painted Priority #2, “John,” my husband. His color was orange. Now orange paint was also running down the sheet . . . blending into the purple from above.

Next came Priority #3, “The Boys.” Their color was blue. The blue’s downward flow was colored by the purple and orange previously painted.



The same was true with Priority #4, “My Work,” painted in green.

And Priority #5, “Other Good Things,” was done in red.

The paper I saw in my mind that day was both messy and beautiful. The colors had all raced to the bottom of the sheet. All the words I had written were touched by the paint from words above them on the list. Each thing on my list of priorities was colored

or influenced by the things with a higher ranking. My decisions about my work had to be made by considering the *more* important, higher ranking things in my life—the things above it. So, how did I come up with the order on my list? I found this ranking in the Word of God.

The Top Priority

One of my sons was doing a survey for his high school Fellowship of Christian Athletes group. He asked me, “Mom, why do you obey God?”

I answered without hesitation, “Because I love Him.”

“Oh, come on, Mom,” he retorted. “That’s what you’re supposed to say. Why do you really obey Him?”

My answer remained the same although I added that initially in my relationship with the Lord, my obedience was probably prompted as much as or more by fear than anything else. As that relationship grew, the motivation was largely love.

The Lord is number one on the chart. God deserves and desires to be first. Recently a friend was telling me his reasoning for following the commands of God. “That is a way we can please God,” he commented.

I agreed wholeheartedly, but challenged him with this question, “Why would we want to please Him?” I was prepared not just with a question but with an answer. Continuing I added, “I believe we want to please God when we truly fear Him and love Him.”

Scripture has many texts on this subject.

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37).

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10).

“I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God” (Exod. 20:5).

“You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3).

Meeting the Goal

Let’s examine what it looks like to have the Lord as your number one priority. It is not a list of do’s and don’ts; it is getting to know God. It means investing time in your relationship with the Lord. One very practical way you can do that is by attending worship and becoming involved in a small group where Christian growth is emphasized.

In addition to regular involvement with your church community, it is also important to spend time by yourself in prayer and Bible reading. It might be helpful to check out your local Christian bookstore for a devotional to guide you along the way. I like to read small segments of

the Word and really focus on applying the truth in those verses to my life.

The key is to always keep your goal in mind. Your goal is to build on your relationship with the Lord, not to check a square and say, “Good, I’ve gone to church. I’m all set for another week,” or “I just read one chapter in the Old Testament and one in the New, so I can get on with my day.” That is not the idea. If you read one verse, only one, and pray that God will teach you about Himself through that verse, you are closer to your goal of building and nurturing a life-changing relationship with your heavenly Father, number one on your list of priorities.

Starting the day in prayer and Bible reading is a good idea. “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35). Because the plan is to put God first, it helps to start the morning with our focus on Him. Sometimes we convince ourselves that an hour more in bed is just what we need to start the day out right. I have learned through the years that getting up, getting going, and getting in the Word gives me a better start.

A morning quiet time can set the tone for your day. Your growing relationship with the Lord can then color the decisions of that day. You will become more familiar with His Word and with His nature.

When our kids were young it was more of a challenge to find a quiet time for study and prayer. I convinced myself that I was not created to get up early in the morning. It seemed like I was always one step behind the kids because they started their day before I did. I can still remember telling John that I just couldn’t get up early. I was willing to admit that I had trouble getting up, but I was not prepared for his response. “You don’t have trouble getting up in the morning; you have trouble going to bed at night.” Hmmm . . . a point worth pondering.

Putting your kids to bed on a regular schedule is step one. If they go to bed on or near the same time each night, they will usually be getting up at the same time each morning. Then you can plan your day. Some moms wait until they put their kids to bed and then begin a cleaning frenzy. More often than not, you need to rest and relax more than you need a perfectly clean kitchen floor.

The Hurrier I Go . . .

Just a few months ago I felt more rushed and frenzied than I could ever remember. John and I had been on a teaching/speaking mission trip to Bolivia and our calendar had been jam-packed prior to and after the trip. I am a woman of high energy and I don't like putting things off that, in my opinion, need to be done now. While we were traveling, many such things accumulated. My e-mail inbox was overflowing. I was behind in my self-inflicted writing schedule. Responsibilities at home were piled higher than I could imagine, and I couldn't ignore the duties I had at church.

So I tackled the unbelievable backlog in true Kendra fashion. I determined that all I had to do was work extra-hard and extra-long hours and I would eventually catch up. Unfortunately, my plan did not work. My problem was that I was investing an inordinate amount of time on my number four and five priorities (work and other good things) to the detriment of all the more important things on my list, including number one—the Lord.

One morning as I tried to explain my frustration and stress to John, he stopped me in midsentence. “I just read something that might be of help to you,” he said and handed me a book with a chapter on the importance of the Sabbath.

Even though I knew that “remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8) was included in the Ten Commandments, I had failed to realize that I was far from being obedient in that area. Sabbath means a time of rest from labor. It occurred to me that I needed to be submissive in this area and take time for silence, solitude, and fasting.

Beginning the very next day, I set aside a morning and let the answering machine take all the messages; let my e-mail go temporarily unanswered; and went to a quiet place (my chair in the family room) with my Bible, a journal, and a copy of *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers.

That morning was amazing! The time of peaceful resting in the Lord was beyond refreshing. It was more than I could have imagined, and I caught a glimpse of why God chose to include a Sabbath rest in His top ten.

Putting the Lord first and building on that relationship is something

that will produce many positive results. God's love will become more real. Your ability and desire to love your spouse will grow out of that. Which is, after all, doing your kids a favor!

Number Two

John made it to the number two spot on my list of priorities. Early on it dawned on me that after my relationship with the Lord, my marriage would have the next most longevity. On our wedding day we committed to each other “until death do us part.” As the years have passed, my understanding of the covenant we made before God has grown. We may not have initially grasped the extent of the commitment, but it was significant to both of us. God's Word says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). I believe that this is not just referring to the physical union of husband and wife, but also a mysterious spiritual connection.

Becoming John's bride has definitely been the second best decision of my life. The first was making a commitment to Christ. You already know that John's actions and decisions drew me to that *most* important commitment. To this day he possesses all of those fruits of the Spirit I told you about earlier—only wavering on occasion. And, if you can believe this, I am still *almost* as infatuated with him as I was the day we met. (If I could bottle that, I'd have a lot of folks clamoring for the concoction!) Furthermore, one of his best attributes is the fact that he is low-maintenance. That is extremely important, because only one high-maintenance adult is allowed per family. 😊

Because John is genuinely pleasant and nondemanding, I want to be sure he realizes his high ranking on my priority list. It is important to know what will communicate my love to him and his importance in my life.

What Time Is It?

John is an “on time” guy. (We'll talk more about that in the chapter on personality differences.) Besides being wired that way, he was a military pilot for thirty years. He synchronized his watch each time he flew.

One way I can let John know that he is important to me is to have meals ready on time. To John that says, “I love you and your wishes are important to me.” If you are like me, it says something like, “Oh, is it already time for dinner? OK, I’ll be there in just a minute.” Timely meals may not be what communicates love to your spouse. But learn how *your* actions can say, “You are important to me—more important than my work or my play—more important than everything and everyone except my Lord.”

Give Me a Call

John illustrated my high ranking on his own list by always finding the time to call me no matter where he was in this nation or around the world. The majority of his flying days were before cell phones were in everyone’s pocket. He exerted a great deal of energy to reach me by phone almost every day he was gone.

Meals on time (one of John’s favorite things), a phone call from John (one of mine), and many other examples told our kids that we placed value in each other and that we considered our marriage relationship to be important. Actually, we were doing the boys a favor. We were loving each other.

The Boys

Third on the list of priorities is our children. Now, most kids could probably understand God coming before them on the list of priorities, but what in the world is Dad doing with such a high ranking? For years I had a cartoon on my refrigerator that illustrated this idea. In the first frame Mom is in her preschool son’s bedroom, comforting him as a thunderstorm rages outside. In the next frame, things have calmed down (both inside the house and outside) and the son says to his mother, “Why don’t you sleep with me tonight?” Mom replies, “No. I have to sleep with Daddy,” and she quietly leaves the room. In the last frame, all alone for the night, the little boy says what is on his mind. “Daddy is such a sissy!”

Kids can be very demanding. Early in their lives they are totally dependent on their parents. That changes as they mature, but leads me

to a good point. Ranking does not necessarily indicate time allotment. Instead it indicates influence, with the number one priority coloring decisions about all the priorities beneath it, and so on down the list.

God's Word tells us that children are a blessing from Him. "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him" (Ps. 127:3). They need to be treated as such, but not to come before the higher ranking priorities.

When the boys were little and John would come home from flying for the Air Force Reserves, they would excitedly jump into his arms and want his full attention for as long as possible. Usually after some time spent listening to stories about their day or wrestling with them on the floor, John would announce, "Mom and I are going to talk with each other now," and the boys knew that his undivided attention would now be mine and vice versa.

This acquiescence by our kids to their dad's shift of attention didn't happen by magic. Instead, they had experienced time and time again the undivided attention of their dad and had also seen him show loving attention to me. They had learned the boundaries and that by exhibiting a little patience and allowing the adults to interact with each other, they would soon regain their dad's interest. If this is a pattern you would like to establish in your home, please be patient. It will take awhile for your kids to understand there has been a shift in the priorities. Be consistent. Your kids will learn.

Work

We are down to number four on the list, my work. I love what I do. It is so much fun that on occasion it has drifted upward on my list of priorities. As an author and a speaker, part of what I do entails reading. Ah . . . when engrossed in a great book I can genuinely announce that I am working. And believe me, that is a whole lot more fun than washing the dishes or doing the laundry or even cooking the meals. I used to say that I was a bad cook, but one of my sons pointed out that I was not a "bad" cook. Instead he labeled me a "disinterested" cook. I considered that title an upgrade and am determined to one day write a cookbook for the disinterested cook.

When I first began my home-based business, my husband, John,

declared himself my governor. He did not mean “governor” like the esteemed head of one of our fifty states. He was referring to the governor on an automobile—the device that somehow keeps the engine from running too fast. In John’s great wisdom, he knew that I needed a little help to keep me (and my Type A behavior) from running too fast. I had to learn how to keep work in its place. God’s Word tells us, “Work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord” (Col. 3:23). It does not say to work constantly. But it is not always easy to keep in check.

The Phone Is Ringing

One of the behaviors that I learned to change to keep my priorities in order was how I handled my business phone calls. There is an amazing phenomenon I have called the “immediate attention response.” When your kids are elementary school age, they will be more inclined to tell you about their day if you are available *immediately* when they walk in the door. If I was on the phone, even if I hung up the receiver within minutes of their arrival, it was over . . . I had lost the immediate attention response. Test it out. You will find that it is true. If at all possible, be available the minute you see your kids. Do not be on the cell phone as you pick them up from school or on the phone when they get off the school bus. If you are, you will miss an important time. I learned this, but not as soon as I wish I had.

By the same token, when I was on the phone in the evenings, John felt robbed of time with me. Talking on the phone instead of giving him my attention was not putting first things first. Don’t make the mistake I made early on in my business. Keep your priorities in order. Work is number four.

Even Harder for Men

Many times this is even more difficult for men than for women. I hope I never forget a mentoring meeting I had with several young women who were all working in a home-based business. Their biggest concern was that the list of priorities they desired was not the list they were living. Each woman at the meeting listened as I walked the group through the importance of determining priorities and creating a plan to actually live out those priorities.

One woman seemed to be distracted. When I opened the session for questions, this was hers: “How can I get my husband to understand how important we are as his family? He is gone fourteen hours a day and doesn’t even connect with the kids on weekends. Last week our two elementary age kids and I vacationed alone in Florida.”

This husband had obviously decided that being a provider was more important than investing in his family. The possibility also existed that work was more fun and more rewarding than being a husband and father. The workplace offers accolades and advancement. Most of us do not get promotions, certificates, medals, or raises as we spend time with our family. Those things can seem more important, but they are short-range prizes. A good relationship with your spouse, loving your spouse, has a long-range reward. It is a reward not just for the two of you, but also for your kids.

I asked this woman if she had spoken to her husband about what she was observing—about his choice of work over family. She said she had tried but that he was defensive and did not seem to understand. I suggested that she give her husband the opportunity to learn more the importance of doing his kids a favor by sharing information with him. As wives, one of the least productive things we can do is to badger our husbands or nag about an issue. Sometimes a neutral source like an article from a Christian magazine or a chapter from an inspirational book can become a launching pad for a positive discussion. Both husband and wife are examining what the author is suggesting, and one spouse is not lecturing the other.

She took note of the suggestions and then I simply asked her if she would feel comfortable if I prayed for her situation. Even though it was not a prayer meeting, all those around the table immediately bowed their heads and we joined together in prayer for this hurting wife and mom . . . a woman whose husband did not see the importance of putting first things first . . . yet.

Other Good Things

And last, but not least, we have other good things. This is one category that can really take over your life. “Good things” are making *more* cookies for the “moppets” or being the president of the PTA or chairing

the retreat committee or facilitating a small group. All of the tasks noted above are good. And this is the difficulty. We are all too smart to say yes to bad things.

Imagine this conversation . . .

“Kendra, I was wondering if you would have time to do a dastardly deed for me. I’ve watched you and you’re pretty fast on your feet. I think you’d be perfect for the job.”

Why, I’d say no immediately, and so would you! We are too wise to sign up for a dastardly deed. But somehow our wisdom takes a vacation when we are asked to do a good thing.

“OK!” “All right.” “I guess I could.” Those might be the right answers. But sometimes we should say no. The offer must be evaluated in light of our priorities. Does the opportunity measure up when it is colored by the things that have a higher priority, a higher ranking on the list? If we say yes to babysitting our neighbor’s kids (a good thing) and spend the next day exhausted and ignoring the needs of our own children, a good thing becomes a bad thing. Have the courage, after considering your priorities, to “Just Say No!” when it is best.

Working Together

This is a book about parenting, about raising great kids. Actually it is a book about working *together* to raise great kids. And who will you be working together with? Your spouse, number two on the list, and the Lord, number one. These relationships are vital because they will color your connection with your kids and greatly shape your ability to raise great kids . . . kids who love God, obey Him, and glorify Him with their lives.

A Good Word from John, the Resident Dad

As a young man recently out of college, I began an exciting adventure. Three days after our honeymoon, Kendra and I packed our bags and headed for Texas, where I was enrolled in pilot training for the United States Air Force. I soon discovered that this training was, in a word, intense. For one year our

instructors taught us and trained us and tested us—just to be sure. To be sure that we were capable of flying the aircraft and accomplishing the tasks we were assigned.

Before each training flight my instructor challenged my ability to recite quickly and accurately one or more of the critical emergency procedures. This was part of the preparation. These emergency procedures had to be memorized verbatim. We could not use the manual. We had to know the information perfectly *before* we ever needed to use it. The steps for each procedure had a specific order and the order was extremely important. The priority was crucial. It was often a matter of life or death.

The emergency procedure for “bail out” comes to my mind immediately. It was simple, only two steps. But the order of the steps was vital. #1—Lift handles, #2—Squeeze triggers. Lifting the handles blew the jet’s canopy from the aircraft. Squeezing the triggers ejected the pilot’s seat from the plane. The importance of the proper sequence, the priority, is very obvious in this example.

Setting priorities and living those out in your daily life is also important. In fact, I believe it is essential for effective parenting. Unlike an emergency procedure in a high speed aircraft, failure to prioritize will probably not cost anyone his life. But our children are depending on us to do the best job we can do. Getting first things first will help you and your spouse work *together* to raise great kids. Maybe you will even be able to avoid some of the unwanted “family emergencies.”

John and I Are Just Alike

We . . .

- . . . trust in the Lord and strive to put Him first in our lives,
- . . . believe in the importance of putting each other next on the list of priorities,
- . . . cherish our children and have seen them grow to be responsible adults,
- . . . work hard, and
- . . . share our time, talents, and gifts with others.

John and I Are Very Different

We are . . .

- . . . a man and a woman,
- . . . an extrovert and an introvert,
- . . . a person who was loaded down with “baggage” and one whose bags were light, and
- . . . an individual whose traditions included Sunday school and church and one whose did not.

We share the same core values, yet we are as different as night and day. But we have both chosen to love each other. Let's see how that looks to a man and to a woman, specifically how it looks to you and your spouse, because I am sure you already know that men and women are different.

Time for Some Honest Evaluation

1. Describe the events surrounding your decision to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior.
2. How has your decision to accept Christ affected your decisions and behavior in regard to your priorities?
3. Write down what you *desire* your top five priorities to be.
 - (1)
 - (2)
 - (3)
 - (4)
 - (5)
4. Write down your current top five priorities, which may not be the same as your answer to the last question. That is OK. Be honest.
 - (1)
 - (2)
 - (3)
 - (4)
 - (5)

5. Where did you rank your spouse on the priority list?
6. Where would your spouse say he or she is ranked?
7. If you have any priorities that you consider out of order, choose one you would like to change.
8. What are some practical steps you can take to get that priority in order?
9. Within the next week, discuss your answers to these questions with your spouse. If there are differences in your priorities, take time to talk about them. Write out a plan of how to “get on the same page” with your top five priorities.