

Applying the Principles

In Ephesians 5:18–6:18, Paul applies his teaching by identifying the core priorities in each major area of life. These core priorities are framed as positive commands, which are applications of the great command to love God and love one another as he has loved us. Since they are mostly positive commands, we need wisdom to connect them to the circumstances and people in our lives. They are commands that cannot be reduced to a list of prohibited actions or even a universal “to do” list.

The areas Paul identifies are as follows:

- *Worship and fellowship* (Eph. 5:19–20). “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- *Church functioning* (v.21). “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”
- *Marriage* (vv.22–33). “Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”
- *Duties of children* (Eph. 6:1–3). “Children obey your parents. . . .”

- *Parenting (v.4)*. “Fathers . . . bring up [your children] in the training and instruction of the Lord.”
- *Employees (vv.5–8)*. “Slaves, obey your earthly masters. . . . serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord. . . .”
- *Bosses (v.9)*. “Masters, treat your slaves in the same way. . . .”
- *Personal spiritual priorities (vv.10–18)*. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God. . . .”

Although Paul does not cover every area of life (political responsibility, Sabbath rest, etc.) he does identify the core values in these major areas.

Through Paul, the Holy Spirit reminds us that the Christian life is a life of multiple priorities. Notice that Paul does not allow us to decide which of these areas of life should take priority over any other area. He does not say, for instance, that your marriage comes before work, or that worship comes before marriage, or that personal spiritual growth comes before child rearing. He does not see these core values as a list of responsibilities arranged in either descending or ascending order.

Biblically, we are not permitted to decide to which areas of life we will apply the commands of God. They must apply to *every* area. Nor may we prioritize *between* the commandments of God. In every area of life and service, we must avoid prohibited thoughts, motives, and actions, and positively pursue the things God calls us to do. In other words, Paul wants us to fulfill our first priorities in *every* area of life before we fulfill lesser priorities in any area. A first priority in any area would take precedence over a second or third priority in any area.

Looked at from the perspective of time management, this means that we should make sure we have completed all our first priority activities in every area of our calling *before* we begin scheduling second priority activities. In the same way, second priorities should be fulfilled before we move on to third priorities. For example, a priority of family does not mean that a father can leave his job early whenever his son has an after-school basketball game. To do so would be to give one area of life priority over another, and to give a lesser activity priority over a first level activity. Let's illustrate how this way of thinking could help Bill.

Wisdom for Bill

Here are some steps that Bill could take, using the AMP Worksheet, to assess his feelings of overcommitment and see if they reflect reality. If he finds that he is overcommitted, he can then look for ways to bring his life into conformity with God's priorities and will.

STEP 1. First, using a blank AMP Worksheet and a pencil with a good eraser, Bill lists every activity he believes he ought to be doing to please the Lord in every area of his life. Some people may be organized enough to keep a log of activities and times for a few days to help them be realistic. Below are the kinds of activities Bill thought about and listed. He used three major headings: (1) God, (2) God's people, and (3) God's work in the world. Other ways of organizing the list can also be used; this particular list is only a suggestion.

Focus on God

- Preparation for public worship
- Personal Bible study and meditation
- Personal prayer and worship
- Christian books, tapes, and TV programs
- Spiritual retreats and conferences