**The Art of Neighboring**

chapter 3

The Time Barrier

The number one obstacle to neighboring well is time. If you are taking the great commandment seriously, undoubtedly you will start to feel conflicted. You have relationships in your life already. And most of us aren’t walking around with extra time, wondering what to do with it. We feel overwhelmed by the amount of stuff that is jammed into our schedules. Our lives are packed already. We already have enough relationships – how are we ever going to find time and energy for one more relationship, let alone six or seven or eight?

It’s vital to take a step back and ask ourselves if we live at a pace that allows us to be available to those who live around us. That doesn’t necessarily mean that you must stop everything you’re doing right now. Instead it’s about taking a look at your commitments and being willing to reprioritize to be more present with your close family and friends, as well as make space in your life for those living next to you.

The problem, though, is that we live in a world that values production, results, and activity. We tend to run from one task at to another and then to another. Our inboxes seem eternally full. There’s always another voicemail to be returned or another email to write. Our to do lists grow longer and longer even though we keep checking things off. Today we have more time-saving devices at our disposal than any generation in the history of the world, yet we feel as though we have less and less time to get things done. Who actually has time to stop and smell those proverbial roses anyway? How is this possible?

Think about it. Even 20 years ago you would never have dreamed that in the near future you would be able to:

* make phone calls while riding in your car
* send mail electronically while riding in your car, while you are making phone calls.
* Own a machine that allows you to record your favorite TV shows so you can watch them whenever it’s convenient for you – and you can even fast-forward through the commercials. (Except for Publix commercials of course)
* turn on your computer and be able to see the people you’re talking to. There’s no longer a need to travel for meetings.

Your reaction most likely would have been, “wow! What am I going to do with all of my free time?” Maybe you would have started dreaming about a four hour workweek. You’d be planning all those extra tee times on the golf course. You be dreaming about spending time with your family or simply lying on a hammock in your backyard.

The fact is that’s what technology *could have* enabled us to do. But instead of having more free time, we’ve added more things into our already crammed lives. Even though we get more and more done, we still pile up the tasks. Our calendars continuously stay full, no matter how many time-saving devices are invented. As a result, we live our lives at warp speed. We become champion multitaskers. We put our heads down and zip to work, dropping kids at school or daycare on the way. We eat on the run while having meetings on the fly, send text messages, do the housework, pay the bills and crash. Then we wake up the next day and do it all over again.

It’s a dangerous way to live. And nobody’s immune. We have to continually battle the temptation to live at an unhealthy pace. It’s easy to justify this type of imbalance.

To help you identify imbalance in your life, you need to be aware of what we believe are three harmful lies at work in the lives of hurried and harried people, people just like us. These lies are insidious. They seem so harmless, but if we leave them unchecked and let them whisper to our minds, they can wreak havoc on our lives. Do you tell yourself any of these lies just to get through your day?

Lie number one: *Things will settle down someday.* The truth is things will only settle down when you die or when you get intentional about adjusting your schedule. We tell ourselves things like, *if I can just get through next Wednesday, then everything’s going to be fine.* But Wednesday comes, and things are fine. There’s a new pressing deadline after that. And another after that.

Lie number two: *more will be enough.* With this lie we convince ourselves that we are just one more purchase or achievement away from contentment. If we could just *buy* more , do more, or be more, than things would be all right. But of course contentment never comes. As soon we purchase, achieve, or obtain whatever it is we want, there’s always something shinier, newer and more alluring right around the corner.

Lie number three: *everybody lives like this.* This lie makes us believe that being overly busy is simply a way of life in our culture. Everybody lives at a frantic pace, so we need to follow suit. The truth is everyone doesn’t live like this. Believe it or not, there are actually healthy people out there.

The healthiest person who ever lived was Jesus. He got a lot done, but when we read about his life, the word *hurried* never comes to mind. Jesus came to offer us a different way of living. He said, “I have come that they may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). He wasn’t talking about full in the sense of having a packed schedule. He managed in the sense of abundance. In other words, a good, meaningful life.

Sometimes to be a great neighbor you have to make difficult decisions. Dave Runyan told the story about a lesson that he learned through one of his greatest passions – sports. In fact, both he and his wife are sports enthusiasts. He says that if left to his own device he could watch sports 24 hours a day. He talks about his son Ethan who at that time was nine years old and who lovde baseball. What Dave knew was the thing that separates the decent athletes from the really good athletes is repetition. That means practices and games – lots and lots and lots of them. Athletic ability is really important, but repetition is really really really important.

He knew the single best way to become good at everything is to do it over and over again. And he knew if you want to give your child the best chance of succeeding in any sport you have to start him or her early. You need to get your kids into the best leagues, the ones that practice and play a lot, and you have to make sacrifices. He said to nurture a kid into becoming a truly great athlete, it takes money, effort, and more money. And by far the single biggest sacrifice that families need to make for their kids to succeed in sports his time. Often that means traveling leagues that play upwards of 40 games a year – yes even for nine-year-olds. As Dave and his wife became convicted about being better neighbors it was clear that Ethan was not going to be able to play in one of those traveling leagues even if it meant it would impact his development as a baseball player. But the decision became clear that it was necessary if they were going to take the great commandment literally. Instead they got him into an eight game a year league and they were comfortable with their decision. Their decision boiled down for the need for them to figure out what was the more important and then to actually live by that decision. Was there sons’ possible athletic career most important? Or was it more important for their family to live a non-frenzied pace of life?

Everyone is busy and we all have different stories and struggle with different issues that compete for our attention and our time. We all should be concerned about how much we cram into our schedules. If we truly want to unburden our lives we are going to have to make some adjustments. And that may mean God will call you to say no to some good things so you can focus on the things that are really important.

Certainly Jesus modeled this lifestyle. Many times he stopped his planned agenda to turn aside and care for someone else who seem to be interrupting him. For instance, as Jesus was walking along one day, a blind man yelled at Jesus to have mercy on him. The disciples considered the blind man a distraction. But Jesus stopped, talked to the man and healed him.

Another time Jesus welcomed little children onto his lap, even though the disciples thought the kids were keeping him from more pressing matters. In yet another instance, Jesus was called on to heal an important officials daughter. As he headed down the road to the officials house, a woman with a health problem got his attention, and he stopped and healed her.

So let’s think about this. Jesus got a lot done but he never seem to be in a hurry. He lived a passionate, purposeful life but was never in a rush. The question for us, then, is how we can live like Jesus? The answer: we must learn to keep the main thing the main thing.

You have to be intentional. A friend of the authors, Brian Mavis, said something to them that resonated.

“In this life, we can do only a few things really well; I think it’s a good idea to make certain that one of those things is what Jesus says is most important.”

That attitude echoes what we believe is an important first step to good neighboring – taking stock of our priorities and analyzing how we spend our time. As Psalm 90:12 says, “teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

The psalmist is saying that if we grasp our limitations, we may choose to prioritize differently. No question, we all have limited time and energy. And if we don’t purposefully choose how we will spend, those choices will be made for us. In essence, we just let life happen, passively. Time spent surfing the Internet, playing video games, or just watching the reruns of our favorite sitcoms won’t amount to anything of value. Of course we’re not suggesting you eliminate such downtime activities from your schedule, because relaxation is beneficial but it’s also these mundane activities that can swallow up the margin of our lives if we are not intentional. We are merely suggesting that you make room for other, more meaningful endeavors.

Sometime you have to give up the good for the great. In Luke chapter 10 there’s a story that points to a better way. Right after the story of the good Samaritan is one about Mary and Martha, two sisters who invite Jesus and some of his disciples into their home for a meal. While Mary sits at the feet of Jesus listening to all he says, the other sister, Martha, devoted herself to cleaning the house and making the meal. The pace catches up with Martha, and she complains to Jesus. She wonders why her sister doesn’t help her in the kitchen, according to the cultural practice of the day.

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (vv. 41 – 42).

There’s a lot we can learn from Martha the key phrase in this lesson is found in verse 40: “Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.” At first glance, it looks like Martha is the one who really understands what’s important in life. Martha opens up her home for Jesus. She care so much about him and his followers that she prepares a meal. That’s all good. What Martha’s busyness causes her to miss out on is an opportunity to be with Jesus and the others. And Jesus reprimands her for it.

This is crazy. Martha gets reprimanded *for serving Jesus.*  But that’s exactly what makes the story so powerful. Jesus is saying that sometime we have to learn how to say no to good things to focus on what’s most important.

Take another look at Mary. In particular this one sentence is significant Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.” In Hebrew culture to sit at someone’s feet indicates a relationship between a disciple and a teacher. In that culture, however, women weren’t supposed to be students, much less disciples of a rabbi. They were supposed to be in the kitchen helping to fix a meal; a woman’s identity was intertwined with her ability to be a good hostess. But Mary defies the cultural norms of her day. Instead, her life is centered around the main thing.

Similarly, if we are going to love our neighbors well, we, like Mary, must go against the grain. We must take time to listen carefully to the teachings of Jesus in the great commandment. Our purpose in life is to love God and love others. That may mean that sometimes we need to forego some good things to devote time and energy to better things, the main things – loving God and loving our neighbors. Living a hurry, frantic lifestyle is the opposite of what Jesus wants for our lives. Author John Ortberg has coined the phrase” hurry sickness”. As he says, “love and hurry are fundamentally incompatible. Love always takes time, and time is the one thing hurry people don’t have.”

Ortberg is correct to identify hurriedness as a toxin. For example, can you remember a time when you were with someone and sensed he or she was trying to rush you? Or can you remember time when you were trying to rush someone else? Did you feel loved in this exchange? And for that matter, did the other person?

If relationships are a priority, then what are some ways we can truly devote time to them? Perhaps much of your time is focused on building relationships with others based primarily on convenience: soccer parents, coworkers, or a small group of longtime friends. And there’s nothing wrong with that. Quite frankly, if you’re working at all on building connections with others, working on these relationships is a step in the right direction. But we must also keep learning what it means to interpret the great commandment literally. In other words, we have to stop making it about what’s only convenient to us and our often self-serving interpretation of the commandment. Instead we must start seeing our literal neighbor for who they are – our neighbors.

Yes, sometimes the term neighbor is used in its broadest sense. We are called to love all people, everywhere. But it’s easy to use this metaphorical definition of neighbor – the world – as our only definition. And if that definition is our default, it probably means that by trying to love many, we actually love very few. Therefore, we should start with our most obvious neighbors – the ones that live nearest to us.

So if our lives are out of balance and we don’t have time to get to know the person next door, the solution is clear – identify and eliminate the nonessentials. Following are three life balancing principles that will help you do just that: #1. Make the main thing the main thing. #2 eliminate time Stealers. And #3 be interruptible.

**Make the main thing the main thing.**

Making the main thing the main thing means taking time to reflect on what is most important in your life and then scheduling around those things. Be intentional about planning your life around the priorities you identify. This might mean planning time to just hang out on your block.

To understand this point, imagine three buckets that are almost full: a bucket of sand, a bucket of water, and a bucket of baseball size rocks. The challenge is to put the contents of all the buckets into one. The secret is starting with rocks, then pouring in the sand so it fills the spaces around the rocks. The final step is pouring the water in so it filters through the sand and fills the bucket.

The lesson is that all the important things fit, as long as you start with the big items first. For us it means prioritizing our life with God first, followed by our life with our family. Then we suggest you prioritize the thing that Jesus says is most important – your neighbors. If you mix up the order, though, you won’t be able to make it all fit. And if you don’t set your priorities, others will do it for you.

**Eliminate Time Stealers**

don’t be afraid to say no to time stealers that get in the way of your top priorities. Not many people would say that watching TV, surfing the web, or playing video games truly enhances their life. These pastimes are not evil, just useless. We have to learn how to stop wasting time with the activities that contribute nothing positive to our life. To do so, you have to learn the art of elimination; sometimes saying no is the best thing you can do.

If you ever find yourself in Florence Italy, you should go see the David, the statute by Michelangelo. If you do, you’ll likely hear the guide tell the in-depth story of how Michelangelo carved the masterpiece. By Michelangelo’s own account, he simply started with a block of marble and took away everything that wasn’t the masterpiece. He was a master of the art of elimination. In the same way, when we take the great commandment seriously, we too, must practice the art of elimination. We must focus on our top priorities and choose not to do the activities that keep us from that focus.

**Be Interruptible**

the idea of being interruptible is being willing to be inconvenienced. It means developing a mindset that accepts the interruption of others. This might not feel natural first, but it’s part of living at a healthy pace. You have to discover the value of putting your agenda to the side and allowing others to enter your daily life.

Our natural instinct is to do what we want when we want to, and how we want to. But we have to learn how to create some space in our life to be able to notice others when they are in need. We all have a lot of errands to run and to do boxes to check off. This eventually makes us hurried on the inside and out. When we create the right kind of margins, however, we can live with a level of peace that allows us to be interruptible.

One Halloween Dave discovered just how difficult the art of neighboring can be when it comes to scheduling. His family was invited to events: a neighborhood party and a get together for his old college buddies and their families. The events were on the same night, and he wrestled with what to do.

He knew he could make a great case in his own mind for seeing all his old college buddies again. After all he doesn’t get to see them as often as he used to and they always have a great time when they’re together. And unlike some of his neighbors he has a lot in common with his college buddies, after all he chose them, and didn’t choose his neighbors. But then he remembered that he and his wife made it a priority in their lives to be committed to spending time with their neighbors. So they did the right thing. They went to the neighborhood party, left after a couple hours, and then went over to the party with his college buddies. They stayed a while and ended up driving back to their neighbors party. They were able to choose both.

In essence, they “interrupted” their original plan to accommodate a new one, thus inviting the opportunity to forge neighborhood friendships, while still maintaining old friendships.

They are not positive they made the right choice. They wonder if maybe they tried to do too much and just skim the surface at both places. Being a good neighbor is an art not a science. In the end they decided if they had to do all over again they would have skipped the party with the college friends because there are only so many people you could go deep with.

So keep in mind that if you take the journey towards neighboring you’ll be faced with tough decisions like these. In this case going to their friends party might’ve been a good choice but going to the neighbors party by the been the better choice. There’s just a learning curve.

Important questions to ask yourself, then, are, do I live in a pace that allows me to be available to those around me? And if not, are all of the things I’m doing more important than taking the great commandment literally?

We probably have to reprioritize our lives. And it will take some real courage to begin to eliminate and create enough space to be great neighbors. Remember, real relationships with your neighbors will happen when we have the ability to be present and connecting to them. It’s one thing to be home; it’s another thing to be present. It’s going to take some real discipline with our calendars and our hearts to become the kind of neighbors that Jesus wants us to be. But it’s worth it.