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## Manage Your Loads

*Do a Few Things Well*

What did you do today? Take a moment and think about all the things you did today and then ask yourself a second question: is what I did today the way I want to spend my life? Because what you did today is your life. Today I spent the first seven hours sitting at our dining room table trying to finish the last few pages of chapter 3. Then I took an hour-long bike ride, ate dinner with my wife, chatted with my kids, read a few chapters from a book, and watched a Meryl Streep movie on TV. That was a good day, because what I did today is how I want to spend my life. What I did today lines up with why God put me on the planet.

Most days I go to the office and spend the day working on a message, interacting with staff, and managing other details. Then I end the day with an hour or two at the gym, followed by a quiet dinner at home with my wife, maybe some reading and flipping between the Twins game and FOX News. Those days also line up with my God-given purpose.

Not every day is like that. On Fridays I golf in the morn-ing and make a big brunch that usually includes blueberry pancakes, bacon, and eggs. Then I take a nap, watch the Golf Channel, hang out with my wife, tinker around the garage or yard, and flip between the Twins game and FOX News. Fridays are when I step off the treadmill and restore. If I am really lucky, my twenty-one-year-old son will join me for a quick pheasant hunt on a nearby farm.

When I asked my wife what she did today and if what she did today is how she wants to spend her life, she said, "I took a walk, read the paper, did the laundry, went grocery shopping, made dinner, talked to the kids, and watched a Meryl Streep movie-yes, what I did today is how I want to spend my life." Call us old-fashioned, but Laurie believes that her twofold purpose on earth is to raise her children and do whatever she can to support me. She's done a great job of creating a home environment that is, as Dr. Phil likes to call it, "a soft place to land." So what did you do today, because what you did today is your life.

Now to be fair, everyone has days that seem to have no purpose whatsoever. My most hateful days are when I have to waste two hours going to Home Depot, spend good money on several gallons of deck wash, and then power spray and restrain the deck. I tell my wife that it's like taking a marker and putting a big, black X on two days of my life. I always protest that a nice-looking deck isn't worth two days of my life every other year.

So everyone has days that are purposeless, and there can be entire seasons like that. When you're elbow deep in diapers, soccer practices, or paying off school loans, there's not a lot of purpose. When you're a business major sitting in a two-hour geology class, there's not much purpose. Max Lucado says, "Most days are just spent rowing." And that's true. Much of life is mundane going to work, studying for exams, paying the bills, running errands. Rowing. That's life.

But in between the mundane and routine, how are you spending your life? Have you made any room in your days and weeks for things that really matter and have lasting value?

I ask the question because it's easy to go through twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years of life and keep deluding yourself into thinking that someday you'll finally get around to doing something purposeful. In their bestselling book, *One Month to Live*, Kerry and Chris Shook say it well: "I know so many people whose favorite day of the week is Someday. But when are we going to wake up and realize Someday is today? This is your life, right here, right now. Wherever you're reading this page, feeling whatever you're feeling, facing whatever you're experiencing, Someday is right now." That's important because the danger with someday is that it can easily turn into never. Eventually, you have to look at your life and wrestle with the question of how you want to spend your one and only life. Is what you're spending your life on worth your life?

I think one of the biggest barriers that blocks people from achieving something significant is that they try to do too many things. They lack focus. They don't lack time, because we all have the same amount of time—twenty-four hours each day. If you ask people how they are doing, most will say, "Really busy—I never seem to have enough time." In reality, everybody has the same amount of time; it's how we choose to spend it.

## **Narrow Your Focus**

A lack of achievement comes from a lack of focus, and a lack of focus comes from trying to do too many things. When people try to do too many things, they end up doing many things poorly and nothing well. Andy Stanley, founding pastor of the twenty-four-thousand-member North Point Community Church in Atlanta, writes, "Devoting

yourself to everything, means committing yourself to nothing," People who lack focus haven't thought through the question, is what I did today the way I want to spend my life? And they risk coming to the end of their days having spent their life maintaining all their properties, vehicles, commitments, memberships, and decks. They risk devoting themselves to everything and doing nothing.

When you read about people who accomplish a lot, you find that they all have an ability to focus their energy on one or two things. For example, if you're a biker, you have an appreciation for what Lance Armstrong accomplished by winning the Tour de France a record six times, especially after surviving testicular cancer. The Tour de France is a 2,290-mile road race that's considered the single most grueling sporting event on the planet. But when Lance's testicle swelled to the size of an orange and the cancer metastasized to his lungs, his fight was no longer for the Tour but for his life. He was given only a 3 percent chance to live. Somehow he beat the odds, but weakened by chemotherapy and atrophy, nobody thought he'd ever race again. Even Lance had to decide whether he belonged back on a bike, and he went through a period of severe depression and self-doubt. Lance writes, "I was a bum. I played golf every day, I water-skied, I drank beer, and I lay on the sofa and channel surfed." Eventually Lance had to tell himself, "I'm alive again, now you need to get back to living." Lance decided he needed to refocus his career, so he spent six months training in the Alps and Pyrenees in France. In his book, *It's Not about the Bike*, he writes:

I only had two things in mind: the Tour de France and having a healthy baby. I geeked out. I did computer calculations that balanced my body weight and my equipment weight with the potential velocity of the bike, trying to find the equation that would get me to the finish line faster than anybody else. I kept careful computer graphs of my training rides, calibrating the distances, wattages, and thresholds. Even eating became mathematical. I measured my food intake. I kept a small scale in the kitchen and weighed the portions of pasta and bread. Then I calculated my wattages versus my caloric intake, so I knew precisely how much to eat each day and how many calories to burn. My crew called me Mister Millimeter. While I ate breakfast, my wife, Kik, filled my water bottles, and I bolted out the door by 8 A.M. to join Kevin and Tyler for a training ride. Most days I would ride straight through lunch until about 3 P.M. When I came home I'd lie down for a nap until dinnertime. I'd get up again in the evening, weigh my pasta and have dinner with Kik. We didn't do anything. We didn't go anywhere. We just ate, and then went back to bed, so I could get up in the morning and train again. That was our life for six months. Sometimes Kik's friends would say, "Oh, you live in the South of France, how glamorous." They had no idea.

Equally revealing is what Lance and Kik didn't do. They didn't hang out with friends; didn't travel, shop, or recreate; didn't eat pizza, unwind at happy hours, or treat themselves to weekends at the cabin or a vacation at the beach. Winning the Tour was as much about what they didn't do. They ate, slept, and trained for one thing: to win the

Tour. And that's the kind of focus it takes to win — at anything.

Most of us will never be world-class racers or have the luxury of riding a bike for a living. But we may have the opportunity to be a world-class student, manager, parent, or leader. And a lot of it depends on focus, on doing a few things well instead of doing many things poorly. So as you think about your life, what do you absolutely want to do well? And what are the activities and commitments that are preventing you from doing it? Because the less you do, the more you will accomplish. If you use the word someday a lot, and if you don't want to look back on your life with regret, you need to bring focus into your life. And you can do that by asking yourself five questions:

## **What Are My Values?**

What do you value, and in what order do you value them? Kerry Shook asked a great question: "if your life were to end right now, what would be your biggest regret?" Would it be giving up on school too soon, a job too soon, a marriage or relationship too soon? Would it be a failure to patch up a strained relationship with a parent, child, or friend? If I died today, what would be my biggest regret? More importantly, what should be in my list of highest values so that I can avoid those regrets?

Almost every decision I make where I go, what I do, whom I spend time with, what I say yes or no to is based on my five big values. I decided early on that whatever else happened in my life, I wanted to:

1. have a close relationship with God
2. have a great marriage
3. have a strong family
4. be physically fit
5. have a purposeful career

Virtually everything I do, nearly every decision I make, is based on how it will impact my five big values. Why is this so important? Because if you don't know what your values are, you'll just drift, and you'll make decisions based on emotions or emails, and those are bad decision makers. You have to decide what your nonnegotiable values are in life and then devote your time and energy to living accordingly. If you don't know what your values are, you can't possibly follow them.

Let's take the value of being physically fit, for example. Every day after work I come to a stop sign. If I go straight ahead over the bridge. I drive home to a warm house, a warm meal, and a relaxing evening with my wife. If I turn right onto the freeway, I drive ten miles to the gym and endure thirty minutes on the hateful elliptical machine, twenty minutes of dreadful weights, and ten minutes of stretching. Then I shower and get home

late. Straight ahead leads to comfort; turning right leads to torture. Every day I face that decision, and five days a week I turn right. Why? Because if I keep going straight, I can't achieve my goals. As hard as it is to turn right, the payoff is worth it. I'm stronger and healthier, I have more energy, and I'm in a better mood when I get home. But it's the value that drives my decision and determines where I go and what I do; it narrows my focus and eliminates competing options. Where might you need to take a right this week, this month, this year? You won't know unless you've established your values.

My second top value is to have a great marriage. I knew that a great marriage would impact every other value. I didn't just want to get married; anybody can get married. I wanted a lifelong marriage filled with intimacy, friendship, memories, and security. That value drove my decision to stay sexually pure all through my teen years and early twenties. I wanted to bring my sexual purity to my marriage because it's difficult to build a great marriage with a sexual past that's been compromised over and over again. The Bible says that when a couple comes together sexually, they become "one flesh," which means that there's not just a physical union but also a spiritual union. But when that oneness is severed by having multiple sexual partners, there's a tearing of the soul that makes intimacy in marriage difficult to achieve. It's why Jesus says, "What God has brought together, let nobody separate" (Matt. 19:6, author paraphrase).

There is forgiveness available for those who have failed in this area, but the damage that comes from exploiting the most personal and private part of who a person is can be very difficult to overcome. So the value of having a great marriage drove my decisions to stay clear of pornography, stay sexually pure, read several books on marriage, get help from a professional counselor, and work through our differences instead of running from them. Laurie and I wanted to bring our full selves to each other in marriage. Values put banks on the river so that your life doesn't flood, causing irreparable damage. Determine your values.

## **What Are My Loads?**

Common loads that most people face include school, work, parenting, friendship, and recreation. These loads change depending on the season of life. Other loads could include volunteering, debt, and possessions. And they are a lot like loads on a circuit. Not too long ago I blew the circuit in my garage because I'd overloaded it with too many amps. It can handle the freezer and sprinkler system, but when I plugged in the power washer, the circuit blew and everything shut down; nothing worked. So I called my friend Steve Rekadai, who's used to fixing my messes. Steve told me that whenever someone in the Rekadai family does something stupid, they say, "I pulled a Bob." I've become a household cliché for them, which is nice.

Everyone has certain loads they have to manage. Let's say you have five main loads, and each load requires 20 amps for a total of 100 amps. Let's also say that 100 amps are the maximum you can have on your life for it to work well. The types of loads you have in your life will vary depending on your values and stage of life, but let's say that you're married, but you're also in school, have a small family, have a part-time job, and are renting an apartment. That's a full load. Add one more thing to that load and the whole thing blows. The mistake a lot of people make is that they try to add a mortgage, second job, third child, or season tickets to an already full load. Or they fail to reduce their friendship load, which is using more amps than are available.

I see this all the time. Two adults decide to get married, they both get jobs, they have two or three kids, and then they buy a dog. But instead of adjusting or reducing their loads so they can manage their marriage, jobs, kids, and dog, they hang on to all their old friends, join a softball league, and buy a cabin. And they add about 80 amps to a circuit that's already maxed out at 100. Guess what happens when you try to run 180 amps through a 100 amp circuit: something blows and you pull a Bob.

This couple might be able to manage their overloaded life for a while, but soon they become exhausted and irritable. They may begin fighting and wonder why they don't feel close anymore. Eventually, boundaries get crossed with an attractive or sympathetic co-worker, or the children start to act out, or the car breaks down, or somebody gets sick. The overloaded circuit is in meltdown mode, and they risk losing all the things they wanted in life: a great marriage, a healthy family, a purposeful career, and physical and financial well-being. All because they lost their focus due to an overloaded life. If they overload the circuit long enough, they risk major losses, including divorce, bankruptcy, foreclosure, and rehab. Sadly, this is what happened to Lance Armstrong. The Tour de France load was so demanding that it siphoned all the amps away from his marriage, and it ended a few years later. Lance beat testicular cancer, fathered a son, and won the Tour. Then he lost his family. The downside to being as focused as Lance was to win the Tour is that it can blind you to other matters that need your attention. Focus is a necessary quality for success, but if it's one dimensional, you can win at racing and lose at life. Manage your loads.

## **What Do I Need to Stop Doing?**

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins writes, "Do you have a 'stop doing' list? Most of us lead busy, but undisciplined, lives. We have ever-expanding 'to do' lists, trying to build momentum by doing, doing, doing—and doing more. And it rarely works. Those who built good-to-great companies (and lives), however, make as much use of 'stop doing' lists as 'to do' lists. They display a remarkable discipline to unplug all sorts of extraneous junk."<sup>7</sup>

What do you need to stop doing to get your sanity and life back? I stopped accepting outside speaking and teaching roles. I commit to only two outside speaking requests per year, and I say no to the rest without guilt. I stopped doing all-day golf outings because a full day conversing with guys on a course drains me and doesn't line up with my values, I still golf on my day off, but I do it with my good friend Trent, who plays as fast as I do. We meet for coffee at my house at 6:30 a.m., and we're back home by 10:30 to enjoy the rest of the day I sold my boat because the to-do list associated with owning a boat is endless you have to pay for it, insure it, maintain it, equip it, fix it, gas it, use it, winterize it, store it, and stand in line at the DMV to renew it. And you get no aerobic payoff while using it. The day I sold my boat I felt amazingly free. I watched the guy tow it down the road and whispered to myself, "That guy just towed away all my headaches." (They say that a man's two happiest days are the day he buys a boat and the day he sells it.) People who buy an increasing amount of cabins, memberships, recreational toys, and properties increase their to-do list a hundredfold. Good for them, not good for me.

To reduce your to-do list, you have to develop a strong no muscle and say no without apology. But to say no to requests, invitations, and friends who overload your life, you have to know your values, and you have to stop worrying about disappointing people. You can't let people talk you into doing something you don't want to do. Most of us should say no far more than we say yes. Memorize your response so that when you're caught off guard with a request, you automatically know what to say with a smile: "Thank you so much for asking. I'd love to do it, but I won't be able to; my days are just too full." Get it down so it just rolls off your tongue, and you'll start to feel the sweet breeze of freedom. This is difficult because it often means cutting out what is good to make room for the best.

I like to prune trees, and it's a little like saying no. Laurie hates it when I prune our trees and bushes because she thinks I get carried away. We had some lilac bushes that were getting out of hand, so I bought a pruning book and read about how to prune the bushes. I read that sometimes what's needed is an "aggressive" form of pruning to maintain the health of the bush. I like the word aggressive, so I took out my shears and, in my wife's words, "hacked the bushes." I pruned them a full third, cut out the old growth, and when I was done, Laurie was very quiet. I wondered about it myself. But four days later we began seeing new growth sprout up, and today the bushes look better than ever.

Every year our lives grow new "activity" branches without our intending it. We grow new meetings, commitments, classes, parties, dinners, concerts, friendships, and sporting events that overcrowd and choke our lives. We hang on to these things even though

they have no value. What's needed is a good pruning. We need to cut off the dead weight so that the light can come through and cause new growth.

Things I've recently said no to:

- A full day of free golf with hundreds of people for a local charity. (I golfed with Trent instead and was home by 10:30 a.m. to spend the rest of the day with my wife.)
- Fishing and hunting trips with guys I don't know well. (Time away for me is too precious to risk being trapped for days with wild cards.)
- Speaking at the one-hundredth-anniversary celebration of my first church. (Someone else spoke at it.)
- Officiating at my cousin's wedding. (He found another pastor to do it.)
- Counseling. (Counselees need two things I don't have enough of: time and expertise.)
- Going out socially. (It drains me. I would rather watch the Twins with my wife at home.)
- Our landline phone. (No more solicitations or monthly bills.)
- A personal blog. (Why invite more access into my already overloaded life?)
- The internet at home. (I get it at work-no more com-puter upgrades or monthly bills.)

What in your life can you start saying no to? The places where people typically overload their lives include the following. People. Many of us try to maintain too many friendships and say yes to too many invitations and outings. That causes overload. Every yes to one person is a no to someone or some-thing else. So whom do you need to say no to so that you can say yes to the people who really matter to you?

*Activities.* These can include your own activities, your spouse's activities, or your children's activities. I recently drove past a local school at 8:30 on a Sunday morning and saw that all four baseball diamonds were occupied, as were both soccer fields. Parents and grandparents sat on the sidelines, and I thought "People's lives are so full that 8:30 on a Sun-day morning is the only free time they have left. No wonder our churches are empty and society is drifting spiritually." In the state of Pennsylvania, it's still against the law to hunt on Sundays. I think they have something there.

*Ownership.* Every boat, cabin, membership, machine, toy, or trinket you add to your already packed life will demand more of your time to use and maintain. So what might you need to stop owning?

*Work.* Most of us have to work, but some of us work too much. And no matter how much work we do, we will never be done. Many of us could work twelve-hour days every day and still not be done. At some point you have to set a limit and stick to it. Sometimes I have to ask myself, "Why did you take that project on, and who's holding a gun to your head?" Usually when I've taken on too much work it's because:

- I'm afraid someone will be upset with me if I say no.
- I'm insecure and don't want to look like a slacker to my colleagues.
- I want to control the outcomes, so I don't delegate like I should.
- I lack sufficient faith in God's provision for my future.

Everybody has limits, and nobody will say no for you. If you're overloaded and never have enough time to attend to your main values, then you've said yes to too many people, events, outings, possessions, and activities. And you're probably doing many things poorly and nothing very well. That's a formula for low achievement. So what branches do you need to prune away so you can become strong and productive again?

In his book *From Success to Significance*, Lloyd Reeb suggests that a good way to cut away the good things to make room for the best things is to make a list of all your roles and responsibilities and then rank them from the highest to the lowest in terms of their importance to you and your life goals. The objective is to eliminate the lowest-ranking ones that do not add as much value to your faith, marriage, family, fitness, and career. Once you list all your roles and responsibilities, select the bottom three activities and un-apologetically eliminate them from your life. Make up your mind ahead of time that the bottom three must go, because it will be hard to eliminate them. You have to force yourself to do it because in the long run it will be worth it.

For seventeen years, I met with three men for once-a-month prayer at a local restaurant; we became good friends. We had breakfast, talked about our families and jobs, and supported one another through hard times. A couple of the guys even kept a journal of all the prayers God had answered over the years. But for the last year and a half, our monthly meeting seemed like it took place every other week for me. And it gave me a late start to my workday, adding more pressure to an already long day. I do my best thinking and writing in the mornings, and even though we met only one morning a month, that morning cut into my best hours and made that week extra hard. I've also noticed that when I'm facing an early morning breakfast meeting when it's dark and cold in Minnesota, I don't sleep as well the night before and experience an energy letdown about midmorning.

But how do you say no to prayer time that you've shared with three good friends for seventeen years? I wrestled with it for several months, but I knew it was the right thing to do. I knew it because my leadership team had become my new small group, and we had monthly prayer times together at work. Realistically, my monthly meeting with my three friends had fallen into the bottom category, and I had to eliminate it to make room for higher priorities. It was painfully hard to let it go and even harder to face my three friends. We're still good friends, and we still call each other occasionally. But when you don't see each other or pray for each other as often, you grow apart a little. But that's

life. Things change, priorities shift, workloads increase, groups dissolve, and you lose touch. But in exchange you're able to deepen other re-lationships that were being neglected and refocus your life based on ever-changing demands and priorities.

## **What Are My Strengths?**

When you know your strengths, you can stop wasting time on things you're not good at. The day I realized I didn't need math, physics, or geometry to achieve my goals, I was free. God didn't wire me for numbers and graphs; he made me to be a writer, teacher, and leader. Knowing that earlier in life would've saved me a lot of shame in school. I didn't know why other students whizzed by me in math; I thought it was because I was stupid and was destined to spend my days in remedial hell. A big part of achieving is knowing what you're bad at so you know what to avoid. I'm equally bad at orga-nizing programs, managing people, forming an agenda, and running a meeting. I muddled through that kind of stuff when I was a youth leader and pastor of a small church, but I never did any of it well. My ability to teach covered a multitude of sins. People thought, "He stinks at everything else, but he can teach, so I guess we'll put up with him." The sooner you can identify your strengths, the sooner you can strengthen them and start achieving at high levels. It's a waste of time to try to get better at things you're not good at and will never produce great results.

Thirteen years ago Scott Anderson joined our staff as a part-time custodian. He was a manager at a local McDon-ald's, but he was always hanging around church picking up after people. So we asked him to make it official. Eventually, he left McDonald's to maintain our buildings full time. Then we promoted him to manage our maintenance staff. Then he became the director of operations. Today Scott is my executive pastor, leads the management team, and oversees our entire staff of two hundred. What's amazing is that not only is Scott great at what he does, but he also loves it. He's great where I'm lousy, and he loves what I hate. The flip side is also true. I'm great where he's lousy, and I love what he hates.

You know what a lot of organizations do? They put people in positions where they're weak, ask them to do what they hate, and wonder why they get mediocre results. At first I didn't want to release the management of my staff to someone else, but it was one of the smartest things I ever did, because then I was able to focus all my time and energy on leading and teaching, and our church began to soar. If you would've told me thirteen years ago that Scott Anderson would be manag-ing my staff, I would've laughed at you. That's because I was ignorant and insecure. Today I am a little less so. Without Scott, and dozens of others who have relieved me of some of my loads, I wouldn't be sitting here writing these words while gazing at a Lake Superior ship heading for port in Duluth, Minnesota. I wish I had learned earlier in life how much I need people. Nobody achieves

at high levels without the help of others. You have to narrow your focus, and that means perfecting your strengths and letting other people do the things you do poorly.

Everyone is good at something, so think about your life and ask yourself two questions: "What do I do well, and what do I love to do?" Another way to ask it is, "What comes naturally to me, and what gives me the most satisfaction while I'm doing it?" Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's workman-ship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." God has given you the ability to accomplish certain tasks well. But he's also given you the desire to do them. Psalm 37:4 says "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart." God combines ability with desire, and they're unique to each individual. Max Lucado says, "You find your sweet spot at the intersection of success and satisfaction."<sup>9</sup>

Penny Hegseth joined our staff in 1997 as the director of our women's ministry. But after three years in that role, Penny admitted, "I found that women were not my passion. It was kind of a joke among my friends that I was planning events that I'd never go to myself. I was doing napkins and centerpieces, and I hated it." So she said, "I can't do this any-more." Her supervisor asked, "What would you like to do?"

Penny had never been asked that before, and it launched her into a whole new role that would help volunteers find their abilities and passions. She did that for four years. But then a three-part tsunami hit: her mother died, her oldest son got deployed to Iraq, and a surgeon accidentally cut her esophagus during a routine procedure. In Penny's words, "I didn't recover well, and I lost my leadership edge." Even though Penny was highly valued at church and her family needed her income, Penny knew her time was up. To everyone's surprise, she officially resigned from leadership at Eagle Brook.

It's often through hardship that God gives you the space to reflect and figure out who you are and what he wants you to do. This was true for Penny. Eventually, Penny went back to school, and today she's a leadership coach who helps people find and maximize their strengths. It's like she's been reborn. When I asked her about it, she said, "I can't tell you how energized and happy I am to have found my purpose. When I coach, I feel God's 'super' on my 'natural'! It's important that people find out who they are before they decide what they want to do. Finding your strengths and gifts is important, but when you discover your passion, that's when you're at your best." When she's coaching people, she works hard at drawing out of them what's naturally strong within them. She listens for repeated words or phrases, and she watches when their face lights up. She says, "When people find what they're naturally passionate about, they soar."

In his book *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, Marcus Buckingham asks, "What do you love, and what do you loathe?"<sup>10</sup> He advises people to pursue what they love and avoid

what they loathe; this is what separates those who soar from those who just survive. It drives Penny nuts when a pro athlete or a politician stands in front of students and says, "You can be anything you want to be." "No you can't," Penny says. "You can't be anything you want to be, but you can be better than you are."

So what comes naturally to you? What roles or tasks do you consistently find yourself doing well? And what lights you up and causes you to say, "I was made for this"? It could be fixing things, raising your kids, writing notes to people, baking, or designing things. A lifetime is too long to waste on something you hate.

## **What Season Am I In?**

People and families go through different seasons. In Ecclesiastes 3:1, the Bible says, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven." There's the going to school season, dating season, high school sports season, going to college and being dirt poor season, graduating and facing the real world season, starting a career and getting married season. When your first child is born, you enter the season of no sleep, no money, and no sex for about eighteen years. Each season requires that you make adjustments to your loads.

For example, the season of small children is like adding a heavy-duty power washer to the circuit-raising small children requires a lot more amps than many jobs or going to school. So for that season, you have to reduce other loads in order to handle the increased load of raising small kids. When our kids were young, I didn't touch a golf club for seven years. There was no golf, virtually no social life, and very little hunting or fishing. We didn't own a home until we were thirty-four years old, because all our amps were consumed by going to school, working part-time jobs, and caring for our kids. Now my twenty-two-year-old son takes me golfing, the house is paid for, I have the remote control back, and it's a brand-new, wonderful season. At first it's hard, but then it pays off.

One of the biggest mistakes people make is that they fail to adjust their life and commitments based on the season they're in. They also fail to realize that each season is temporary. Being a student is one season. It's not forever. Being a single adult or a newlywed is another season, and there's a lot of freedom in those seasons to travel, explore, and play golf. But the next season of having kids and establishing your career is the most demanding season in life, and it's going to be that way for about eighteen years. No matter who you are or what your circumstance is, there is an unavoidable level of hard work associated with raising young children, and it's critical for the long-term future of your family, home, and career that you don't overload the circuit in that season and do irrevocable damage to something. People who make no adjustments in their

outside commitments, spending, travel, or social life often end up breaking something very precious to them.

So what season are you in, and what might you need to say no to, get rid of, drop, or sell to reduce your load and get your life back? You can't do it all if you want to reach your goals and live according to your values. One working mom said it this way: "I am spread so thin right now that I don't think there's anything left in me to devote to anything else. I am an overworked professional, an overtired mother, a part-time wife, and a fair-weather friend." If you try to have it all, you could end up having nothing.

## **You Always Have Options**

Recently, I was driving to work on a Monday morning at 6:45. I was coming over a one-lane bridge with traffic inching along both ways. I glanced over and saw a young couple. He was in a suit and tie; she was in a sharp business suit. She was looking down, busy doing something; he looked tense with both hands clutching the steering wheel. In the back seat were two car seats with swinging toys to entertain the tiny passengers. No doubt they had to make a quick stop at a day care. It had probably already been a stressful day for them. Got up at 5:30, got dressed, fed the kids, let the dog out, grabbed some breakfast. Then after struggling through a ten-hour day of meetings, projects, and managing people, there's the call from work: "Honey, I need to stay late." He can hear the irritability in her response. "But what about the kids? I thought we were going to get groceries. What about supper and the laundry?" Then she's fifteen minutes late to day care, the kids look dazed, she can tell they've been crying, and all she can do when she gets home is collapse.

I looked at that little family unit on the bridge that morning and thought, "How will they ever make it?" You can keep up that pace for a while, but eventually something snaps. You can't endure that kind of pace without doing damage to your soul and to the vital relationships in your life. The season of raising small kids is the most demanding, most precarious season in life, and people who want to survive it have to narrow their focus. They have to make hard choices and delay certain dreams because they realize that raising young kids is an enormous load that demands every extra amp they have. People in this situation often feel trapped and think there's nothing they can do about it, but there are always options. They could:

- take a leave from work
- accept a lower income level for a few years
- accept that they're going to be poor for a while
- rent instead of owning
- ask their employer for flextime

- delay their career dreams
- ask for help from parents, family, or friends
- limit or drop their social relationships and memberships
- let go of their softball leagues, trips with the girls, and other commitments from their former lives as single adults
- seek the advice of professionals or wise mentors who can help them make sound decisions
- get connected to a support group, young couples group, or neighborhood group
- get creative and ask each other what they can drop, alter, change, or reduce

Awhile back I received a letter from a young mom who wrote:

Dear Bob,

Each time you speak about the importance of raising young children, it brings me to tears. We parents don't get many pats on the back. However, the rewards we get are unbeliev-able. Many people tell me how "lucky" I am to be home. is usually " luck has nothing to do with it." My response God placed the desire on our hearts to have one of us home with our kids long before we ever had them. We made an advanced decision-together. Fortunately, I get to be home, and that is my passion. My husband teaches seventh grade and gets up in the middle of the night three times a week to deliver newspapers. I wait tables three nights a week and run the newspaper business one day a week. Our two boys are always being cared for by myself, my husband, or their amazing grandmother.

My point is that it is not "luck." It is a choice that many two-parent families can make. If their financial situation is not ideal and one cannot be home 24/7, there are options. They may need to work odd hours and jobs they may be overly educated for. I have my master's degree and a HUGE student loan payment. However, "I am my kids' mom!" as Dr. Laura would say. There are always options.

I'm not saying that it's impossible for both parents of young children to work, only that when both parents work, something else has to give, be dropped, or get delayed. Op-tions abound, and every season has different loads. The good news is that every season has an end. Being a student ends, raising young kids ends, the teen years end, mortgage pay-ments end. There's plenty of time to work sixty hours a week, chase all your dreams, and knock yourself out when the kids are raised. Don't wreck your home and life by ignoring the season you're in.

How can you tell if you're overloaded and in danger of breaking something? Seven common signs indicate when a person is overloaded and heading for a crash: (1) a chronic sense that there's never enough time; (2) constant irritabil-ity; (3) physical tension in one's body, drumming the fingers, clenching the jaw; (4) an inability to listen to and be fully present for people; (5) the loss of laughter; (6) a sense that you've lost control

of your life; and (7) fatigue. I can always tell when I'm depleted, because I get irritable and lose my ability to laugh. Everyone has their moments, but if all you have are moments, that's a sign of a mismanaged life. It's also a sign that God might be trying to tell you something. God did not intend for you to go through life stressed out, angry, and depleted. There's a better way, but you need the faith and courage to choose it.

What might you need to drop before it drops you?