

Food for Thought—The Importance of People



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When I was growing up, some people would drive past the entrance to the actual city dump to instead dump their trash on our farm where the road passed through it (I guess it was cheaper than going to the dump). One day my brother, my husband, and I were picking up trash someone had tossed, and we had paused to contemplate why people would do this. My brother—a missionary doctor—sighed as he surveyed the scene and said, "People are just no...good." My husband and I have laughed about that ever since because this truism came out of the mouth of someone who would spend his life trying to save and mend people, even the no darn good ones (which is actually all of us). And this is a reminder to me of how God sees us. We are no darn good, and He knows this better than we do; yet at the same time, we are of inestimable worth. This truth is evident in so many ways.

When people know they are nearing death, for example, it is almost always people they are thinking of. They are not trying to figure out how to take their limo to heaven. They are usually thinking about their relationships with people. Whether they are grateful for the people they love or feel regretful about the relationships they may have squandered, it is people they are thinking of. When all the trappings of life are evaporating, the importance to us of people becomes very clear. And the people who aren't dying know this importance of persons too. People drop whatever they are doing—often things that are important—and hasten to the bedside of a friend or family member nearing death. Deep down, we know people's lives (and our relationships with them) are important. Even when someone dies whom we are confident has gone to heaven, we try to do our best for them at funerals, graves, etc. I think this is because we sense people are important, and so in our hard-to-articulate, not-always-purely-logical, and sometimes clumsy ways we act in a manner that shows this deep realization, and we try to honor it.

In films and books, we love to see a character—often a character who has been a bit of a clown or perhaps a self-interested rogue—who at some point makes a crucial choice to act (usually at great risk to himself or herself) to save or protect someone else. The best part of *The Sound of Music* is probably the part where Max, who's been enjoying his life as a well-mannered freeloader with wealthy friends, takes a risk in order to help the Von Trapps escape from the Nazis. In *Casa Blanca*, the best part is probably when Rick and Captain Renault decide to leave their previously stay-out-of-it, self-protecting ways of living in order to save Ilsa and Victor (and will do the same in future for other people fleeing the regime). It is this decision which is the beginning of their famous "beautiful friendship." Neither movie would be half as good without these characters coming to a crucial moment and making the choices that show they realize the importance of people's lives is more important than their comfort or safety.

Prisoners of war routinely risk severe beatings in order to communicate with one another (whether by tapping out morse code on cell walls or some other method) because connection to other humans are so vital. Our need for others is so great that solitary confinement is one of the worst punishments we can be given, and if people were not important, this could not be so.

The greatest thing that Moses ever does—and this is a man through whom earth-shaking miracles are done and through whom the law is given and the Israelites freed—is probably his volunteering to be killed in

the Israelites' place. In spite of the fact that the Israelites had been acting badly, Moses saw their lives as important. And this is probably the most important way in which he prefigures the Lord Jesus, the prophet who would be "like him" (Deut.18:15).

In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus makes it clear that treating another human (generally forgotten or overlooked humans) kindly is as significant as if we were doing it for God himself.

In the Parable of the Rich Fool, we see a man who puts all his efforts into gathering material wealth (and supposed security), a man who tells himself that now he can live a life of leisure. He does not know, Jesus says, that this very night his soul will be required of him. Unbeknownst to him, he is about to die, and he has made zero preparations for eternity, no thought to giving an account for himself, etc. If you are like me, you may never have stopped to ask yourself, what should the man have been doing instead? What should he have invested his energy in? He would have done well to invest his energies in people (for this is one way to offer a living sacrifice to God). There is no indication that it ever crossed his mind to wonder how his prosperity could've been used to help the people in his community or even that his bountiful harvest and decreased work load would give him time and opportunity to visit the lonely or overlooked people in his life.

People are important enough to God that He is described as having our names carved on his hands and as forever bearing the marks (the Lamb Slain Before the Foundation of the World) of His sacrifice for us, marks which show how important people are to Him.

Even the long genealogies in the Old Testament testify to this fact of God's care about us. The names on the list may mean nothing to us (some will, but many won't), but each person in the list was known by God. Each was not merely a list item but a person God knew, a person whose story God knew well.

C.S. Lewis reminds us of something we often forget. "There are no ordinary people," he says. "You have never talked to a 'mere mortal.' Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations--these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit...." Remembering this may caution us to use care with the people we encounter and touch in our lives—both in our efforts to show them wisdom and guide them away from snares if we have the chance to do so and especially to show them mercy, respect, and kindness.

Jesus's name Immanuel ("the God who is with us") and the incarnation itself testify to God seeing people as of great importance. He came to live among us and die for us in order not to lose us. He would not go to so much trouble if people were not worth it. And He most of all should know.

People are a paradox. We really are no darn good, yet at the same time our worth appears to be beyond price. This is how God sees us. This is what we deep down sense is true. And it is important to remember it.