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Of Greatest Eternal Importance

BY JONATHAN WHEELER

They always told me that being a student missionary would change me. They always told me I would never look at life the same way after a year as a missionary. They always told me that mission life would change my perspective. I heard God's calling, so I went.

My name is Jonathan Wheeler, and I am a student missionary teaching middle school mathematics at Adventist School Bouchrieh in Beirut, Lebanon. It has been an exciting journey, and I'm not sure who has learned more in my classroom — my students or me. In either case, I know God has used this year to shape my personality and strengthen my character in ways that were not always comfortable, nor easy. The greatest lesson, and the one I wish to share in this article, is the importance of showing God's love, specifically through one-on-one relationships.

Personal relationships are challenging for me. Personality tests rank me as introverted and very task-oriented. For example, outside of teaching math, I assist in Bible classes, coordinate weekly chapels, teach music courses after school, sponsor a robotics club, help out with IT and coordinate an earliteen Sabbath school class. It is a foregone conclusion that the more time I spend on side projects, the more I tend to escape from the one-on-one personal relationships with my students.

There is a thrill in getting many things done every day, but checking things off a to-do list can turn into an



Jonathan Wheeler

addiction. For me, the addicting mechanism is a powerful one: seeing how many items you can check off by the end of the day, and witnessing the fruits of your labor almost immediately. Whereas, when it comes to teaching and mentoring, the results do not live on a checklist. They can take years to show up, and seldom does the teacher see the result of his work.

Jesus took person-to-person ministry very seriously. Luke 10 records a tale of two sisters. Martha, no doubt,

was a fantastic multi-tasker who had gifts for efficiency and productivity. She boasted huge lists of checked-off items every day. But when she sought recognition from Jesus, he pointed out that Mary's attitude of spending time building relationships held greater importance for the gospel's sake, a purpose only to be realized fully at Jesus' return.

In John 12 and Matthew 26, Mary offers to Jesus the most expensive perfume she can obtain. Judas, who was entrusted with handling all of the finances, was indignant. He argued that those funds could have been turned into an immediate tangible result on the tables of dozens of poor people. But, again in this example, Jesus recognizes and blesses the intentional one-on-one relationship that Mary



is honoring with her time and money. He reminds those present that the effects of her sacrifice would not be seen immediately but reverberate for centuries to come.

It took me until my year as a missionary to realize this weakness I have — allowing productivity and finishing dozens of tasks daily to distract me from the one-on-one relationships that hold the greatest eternal importance.

In March, the Friendship Team from Andrews University, led by Glenn Russell, conducted a week of prayer at the school in which I serve. A student by the name of Kevin, who previously had served in my position here in Beirut, was on the team, and we spent several hours together. We discussed the difficulties of teaching, and prayed for each other. At the end of the week, Kevin had seen my tendency to be super-productive with all my side projects, and point-blank reminded me that my mission here was to be a mentor to the students.

I knew he was right. I had become very distracted. That week, I wrote down a simple phrase in my prayer journal: That I make people a priority — March 25. I have kept returning to that page in my journal since then, and have been challenged to make it a continued prayer. Only the power of the Holy Spirit can override my natural tendency to indulge in short-term, feel-good projects and push me to instead water seeds that grow more slowly.

Most inspirational writers end by saying, “You should value people. So, go and do it. Good luck!” My story, however, continues.

When you make yourself vulnerable in order to build relationships with people, sooner or later you will get burned.

Teaching is hard work. No matter how hard you try or what methods you implement, somebody is always going to find fault with your approach, and let you know they’re not happy with what you’re doing. Whether it’s a parent, an administrator, another teacher, a social worker or, especially,

students, it is always discouraging. This discouragement is a huge reason why new teachers abandon their career in favor of non-personal jobs. We hate being corrected, and so we attempt to avoid situations of vulnerability, even though these offer the greatest potential to lead individuals to Christ.

But is that what Jesus did? Not at all. The effects of Jesus’ ministry were not all seen here on Earth. Jesus’ life was characterized by sacrifices to those who criticized his efforts the most. Jesus sacrificed the most for those for whom we would want to do the least (see Romans 5:7–8).

What a challenge! God catches me off-guard nearly every time when he reminds me of this at the end of a discouraging day of teaching: The students that cause me the greatest grief have the most need of seeing God. With a flock of 100, the Good Shepherd endangers his life for the one lost sheep. Those very times when my worst students press my buttons the most are the exact moments the Holy Spirit is begging me to show Christ’s patience.

We will never realize all the fruits of our labor on this Earth, especially the results of the relationships we build by the grace of the Holy Spirit. I know, for a fact, that I will not see the full impact of my work by the time I leave Lebanon and head back to the States. Only Heaven knows the effect our brief ministry on this Earth will have. The temptation to retreat to non-personal work is seeing the fruits of our effort in the here and now. But if I am to be honest with myself, I know God is ever calling me to serve his cause that is concerned with things bigger than this life. From my perspective, building one-on-one relationships for his kingdom is the greatest calling to which I can answer. May God be glorified as he strengthens each one of us for this work!

Jonathan Wheeler is a senior at Andrews University, majoring in physics, mathematics and electrical engineering.