

CHAPTER 3

Personal Needs: What Do People Need to Live Effectively?

I once spoke with Mr. A who had just purchased an expensive home for his family. He was beginning to make a substantial income but had not yet recovered from serious debt. It seemed to me that buying a less expensive home and paying off a few overdue loans would have been a more responsible thing to do. This sort of behavior was one of many such irresponsible actions. I asked him why he bought the large home, looking for an explanation for his irresponsibility. He told me that he loved to invite people over and listen to them admire his home. It made him feel good inside. Why did he feel good? What *need* was Mr. A trying to meet with a fancy house?

Mrs. B felt cold toward her husband and was strongly attracted to another man. She was a Christian woman and felt terribly guilty over her feelings. I asked her how the two men differed. Mrs. B really couldn't list any important differences between the two men except one: she was supposed to be committed to her husband but her relationship with her paramour in-

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involved no commitment whatsoever. What *need* was threatened by commitment?

Mr. C told me he was a pathological liar and I believed him. It appeared that his lies always put him in a favorable light with respect to business success. He would tell his wife he had made a bundle that day and wanted to celebrate by going out to a fancy restaurant. The truth was he had just been fired. If friends wanted to do something with him and his wife which he couldn't afford, he would borrow the money, tell his wife he had earned it, and go out for a good time. Why did Mr. C lie? To say that he is a sinner is true, but it does not fully explain his lying. What *need* did Mr. C's lying meet?

A middle-aged woman (Mrs. D) fell into a deep depression after her children left home. Her husband had just accepted a job which took him away from home a great deal. She was now on her own more than she had ever been in her life. Her depression seemed to date back to an important decision she had made on her own which turned out badly. Why was Mrs. D depressed? In order to understand her depression, you must answer another question. What *need* was being protected by Mrs. D's depression?

Deep inside each of these people rumbled a persistent demand, one which they couldn't clearly hear themselves saying, yet one which was driving them ruthlessly in disastrous directions. If we could listen to the faint but powerful murmurings of their unconscious minds, we would hear something like this:

I need to respect myself as a worthwhile person. Sometimes I don't feel like a person at all. I need to feel whole. I must like myself, accept myself. In order to really accept myself, I must be a somebody. I cannot accept myself if I don't matter to anyone or anything. I must be able to regard myself as important; I must matter somewhere; I must see myself as

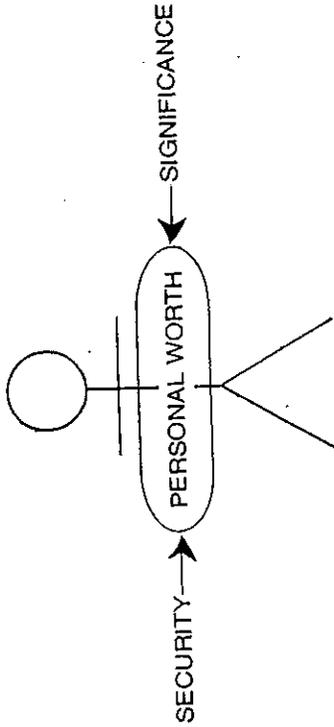
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able to do something that is meaningful to someone. But even if I have that, it isn't enough. If I really am to feel like a worthwhile person, I must be loved by another person, loved unconditionally, accepted just as I am without demand or pressure. If I am loved because I behaved well, I am under pressure to keep on behaving well. I know I might not. Therefore I could lose love. I must be loved with an acceptance that I cannot lose no matter what I do.

Sorting through this "stream of unconsciousness," a simple organization emerges: people have one basic personal need which requires two kinds of input for its satisfaction. The most basic need is a sense of personal worth, an acceptance of oneself as a whole, real person. The two required inputs are *significance* (purpose, importance, adequacy for a job, meaningfulness, impact) and *security* (love — unconditional and consistently expressed; permanent acceptance).

I believe that before the Fall Adam and Eve were both significant and secure. From the moment of their creation their needs were fully met in a relationship with God unmarred by sin. Significance and security were attributes or qualities already resident within their personalities, so they never gave them a second thought. When sin ended their innocence and broke their relationship with God, what formerly were attributes now became needs. After the Fall Adam hid from God, fearing His rejection. They both blamed another for their sin, afraid of what God might do. They were now insecure. The earth was cursed and Adam was instructed to work by the sweat of his brow. There was now a struggle between man and nature. Would Adam have the strength to handle the job? He now was wrestling with threatened insignificance.

The need structure of a person might be diagrammed as seen on the next page.



My experience suggests that although men and women need both kinds of input, for men the *primary* route to personal worth is significance and for women the *primary* route is security. Consider the examples at the beginning of this chapter. Mr. A wanted money and the recognition money brings. It is crucial to a proper understanding of him to realize, however, that neither money nor recognition were his ultimate goal. They were merely means to an end. His real goal was significance as a basis for feeling self-worth. He needed to regard himself as significant. And let me insist, at this point, that we must not confuse the sin of pride (I want to run the show, I want my way) with the need for significance. Significance is a normal need, an intrinsic part of man as a personal being, a need which only God Himself can fill, and a need which He wants to fill. Mr. A's problem was not that he needed to be significant. We all do. His real problem was rather a *wrong belief* about what would make him significant. He had fallen for the devilish American myth that money and prestige make you into a someone and he had totally rejected the Lord's teaching that in order to find yourself (to be truly significant and hence a worthwhile being), you have to lose yourself in total submission to the purpose of God in your life.

Mrs. B's problem was due partly to threatened significance, but was more basically related to a deep fear of rejection. Her need for security was involved. A committed relationship required a maturity she had never developed. As a youngster she had been pampered to the point where she came to believe that love was a

one-way street. All you had to do was sweetly make your needs known. If there was no response, cry, sulk, or charmingly smile and a loving benefactor would appease you by giving in to your every demand. The result of such training was (in Adler's terms) an undeveloped social interest, a felt inability to give. The first year of her marriage was a frolicking good time. Husband and wife were infatuated with each other, they were good looking, healthy, sexually alive, had plenty of money and no in-law problems. But the realities of two separate human beings living together soon caught up with them. It became apparent that lifelong marriage required a mature commitment beyond what the first year's honeymoon demanded. Mrs. B felt threatened. "Can I do it? I've never had to give. Maybe I can't please him. I'm used to being loved without having to do anything. But marital love is a two-way thing and I have to give myself to it."

As we talked it became clear that the few times she received disapproval in childhood were instances where she had failed to meet other people's standards of performance. Although as a child an indulgent love was consistently hers for the asking, she was dimly aware of the possibility of rejection for failing to measure up. Now she was wondering how her husband would react when he saw her as she was, as he looked beneath the pretty face and the fun personality. She was worried that even if she were to commit herself to the marriage and responsibly try to be a good wife, she might prove inadequate for the job (threatened significance need) and therefore be rejected (threatened security need).

A typical human pattern is the tendency to flee to safety when needs are threatened. She knew she could win acceptance in an immature relationship which demanded nothing from her beyond being attractive and fun. A committed relationship in which she had to give of herself as a person and maturely try to satisfy another human being provided an opportunity for her to be rejected. The risk of commitment was overwhelming. She told me that even her adulterous daydreams never included becoming

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serious with another man. For her it was safe to flit about from one uncommitted relationship to another, never facing the awful possibility that she actually could be rejected by someone. Notice that Mrs. B's dilemma becomes understandable when we discuss her threatened need for security.

Mr. C, the consistent liar, had a problem similar to Mr. A's problem. He believed that significance depended on always being able to live up to a certain image. He was a good-time Charlie, Mr. Friendly, one of the guys. Everyone liked Mr. C except his wife. She knew he was a phony. How did he get this way? Why did he lie so much? Mr. C recalled to me the day when, as a youngster, he wanted to go with the neighborhood circle of friends to the carnival passing through their rural town. But he needed \$2.50, which he didn't have. He remembered going from one family member to another, then to neighbors, looking for someone to give him the required money. But no one gave it to him. As he sat in my office, he vividly recalled (and actually experienced) feelings of desperation — it would have been sheer horror for him to admit to the kids he didn't have enough money to go. Although raised in a rigidly moral home, his conscience gave way under the weight of his need to be a someone in the eyes of his peers. He stole the money from a local grocery store. Other background factors, including a father who never provided adequately and a mother who constantly complained about it, taught him an approach to meeting significant needs which produced many problems.

In Mr. C's mind, his deep need for significance could be fulfilled only if he never had to admit financial failure to friends or family. Facing their expected rejection, scorn, and criticism represented an ordeal to be avoided at all cost. Most of his personal problems revolved around this wrong assumption about what he needed and what he must avoid in order to be a someone. In his adult life he always had to go first class in whatever business he initiated. He had to prove his success. Available capital was never sufficient to handle the exorbitant and outlandish expenses he incurred in his pursuit of significance. As a result, successive

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businesses, each of which probably could have been profit-making, fell one by one into bankruptcy. One psychiatrist had labeled this pattern as a fear of success. I think, rather, it represented a fear of being in a situation where success was expected. Most neurotic behaviors are attempts to provide excuses for lack of success. Mr. C desperately needed financial success to bolster self-esteem, but was terrified of being in a position where he should be able to make money. In that situation he might fail and failure would utterly devastate his sense of personal worth. He therefore created problems (unconsciously) in his business which he could then blame for his lack of success. If he made good money he could claim success in the face of adversity. If he failed he could shift the blame for failure to the problems and away from himself, thus protecting his self-esteem.

Predictably his self-created problems led to repeated business failures. Although pushing responsibility for his business collapses on to his circumstances helped protect his fragile sense of personal worth, the situation left him in the unbearable position of not having enough money to keep up with his friends and provide well for his family. Any question from his wife about financial matters, no matter how innocent ("Can we afford to buy Johnny a new pair of shoes?"), was felt as a criticism and triggered deep hurt and occasional angry outbursts. Without enough money to impress his friends and family, lying became the only means available to maintain some sense of self-esteem. Whenever people probed beneath the lies and pinned him down to the truth, he simply resorted to blaming external problems for his financial crunch. To admit "I have no money and it's my fault" was for him absolutely equivalent to stating that he was a nobody, a being thoroughly devoid of any personal worth or importance.

A typical attitude encountered in an immature personality is, "It's not my fault. I will not admit failure." To admit failure defeats the purpose to which the immature person is passionately dedicated: protect your self-esteem; it's a fragile commodity. His commitment is to avoid commitment, to never really assume responsibility. Always leave yourself a cop-out: "I will do this if

... but if such and such happens, I no longer will hold myself responsible." As long as he can avoid responsibility, he can avoid personal failure. Self-acceptance for so many people depends upon performance. What a tragedy in light of the fact that Christ's death provided God with a basis for accepting us in spite of our performance.

Mr. C's entire web of deception was predicated on a wrong assumption: "In order to be significant, I must avoid disrespect and scorn by keeping up financially with the expectations of my peer group and my family." The pressure to perform produced by this kind of thinking is behind many ulcers.

Consider Mrs. D. She had become seriously depressed after the following things happened: children left home, husband took a job which included extensive travel, a major decision which she had to make while her husband was unavailable turned out badly. The last event seemed to precipitate the depression.

Mrs. D had always been a competent, able woman, raised in a loving family where her abilities were recognized and appreciated. Like so many other children she unconsciously assumed that competence and love were somehow related. She married an unusually strong, gently authoritarian sort of man. Over the years of her marriage she came to depend on his leadership to the point where, without realizing it, she lost some confidence in her own ability to handle situations. These feelings never surfaced however, because she felt quite capable of performing competently so long as her husband was there to back her up, counsel her, and untangle whatever problems she might get into.

Her role as mother provided some real satisfaction for her. Although she made the mistakes all parents make, her kids accepted her as part of an effective parental team. She allowed her husband's quiet strength to slowly undermine her confidence in herself as she came to lean more and more on him. When the children left home, she lost a source of acceptance. Her husband then took the new job which kept him on the road for weeks at a time. One morning while he was gone, she woke up feeling tense.

The nervousness increased until she became visibly agitated. Although she tried to ignore it, the feelings continued for a few days. People began to comment on her shakiness and asked her what was wrong.

Apparently the problem was precipitated by a decision required of her on the day her nervousness began. Her basis of security had always been to appear competent and able. Because she never had to be independently competent in her marriage, her confidence in her own abilities had slowly eroded. Now her circumstances demanded a decision she wasn't sure she could make wisely. Her security, which depended on competence and good performance, was threatened. She haltingly made the decision and stumbled on with lingering feelings of anxiety, afraid that at any moment her incompetence would reveal itself and people would be sorely disappointed in her. When the inevitable moment came and she failed in a responsibility, she was face to face with her own worst fears. Because she had always believed that acceptance was conditional on good performance, she was certain no one would accept her, especially her family. When her husband returned, his mild criticism thoroughly devastated her. She fell apart — not because he criticized her, but because she felt utterly worthless and unlovable. "I am acceptable if I perform well. I did not perform well so I am not acceptable. I cannot be loved. I am therefore a worthless human being."

In an effort to protect herself from further blows to her security, she retreated into a motionless depression in which she stubbornly refused to do anything. Her thinking seemed to be: no decisions — no failure; no failure — no rejection; no rejection — no further hurt. Depression was her safety zone. Persistent guilt feelings ("I'm no good; I've hurt people by my wrong decision") not only supported her withdrawal from further possible failures but also served as a subtle means of expressing antagonism toward a world which had hurt her badly. Her self-accusations and derogation became a real burden to her family, especially her husband, who was unable to reassure or comfort her. Adler speaks of the "opponent" in neurosis, suggesting that neurotic symptoms

often are directed at someone, perhaps to get attention or to express resentment.

Mrs. D's depression then included two elements: (1) an excuse for avoiding more mistakes and more criticism which would combine to further injure her self-esteem and (2) an expression of hostility at a husband who had unwittingly undermined her self-confidence by his strong, assertive life style. Notice that her personal need was to feel worthwhile based on the security of being accepted by others. Acceptance in her mind was earned by competent behavior. Since her goal of living above criticism by making no mistakes was unreachable, she chose not to live at all. She retreated into total withdrawal. Depression was both the natural result of cutting off all contacts with life and also and more importantly an excuse for no activity. "How can I make decisions when I'm this depressed? I can't do anything. If only I could be freed of this depression, I could function again."

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The point of this chapter is to illustrate and clarify the two basic needs of people. We all need significance and security if we are to function effectively. If we can regard ourselves as significant and secure, we feel worthwhile as persons. Proverbs 18:14 asks the question, "A wounded spirit who can bear?" When a person feels worthless, he will make it a top priority matter to protect himself from an increase in those unbearable feelings and to ease the feelings already there.

Freud initially taught that libidinal needs of power and pleasure were primary and that neurotic symptoms developed when these needs were not gratified. Many counselors today operate on the assumption that when a person's selfish needs for exerting power or experiencing pleasure are not met, he should find some way to satisfy those needs. Counseling often amounts to an effort to help people let go, do their own thing, whatever feels good. "Be yourself, assert yourself, express all that you are" are common expressions in counseling. "Meet your needs for power and pleasure in ways that will not incur society's wrath. Be a socialized self-seeker."

Other counselors look for buried conflicts thwarting the satisfaction of the needs. "What is the trauma lurking in the unconscious which is stifling growth toward the genital personality?" (Freud's term for a maturity characterized by need satisfaction.) Therapy then becomes an exploratory search for hidden problems which, when uncovered, will free the person from his problems. Mental illness is defined as consisting of unresolved unconscious conflicts.

Directive therapists tend to believe that if a person will just behave responsibly, everything will be all right. Counseling becomes little more than the identification of irresponsible patterns of behavior and exhortations to behave responsibly.

My thesis is that problems develop when the basic needs for significance and security are threatened. People pursue irresponsible ways of living as a means of defending against feelings of insignificance and insecurity. In most cases these folks have arrived at a wrong idea as to what constitutes significance and security. And these false beliefs are at the core of their problems. *Wrong patterns of living develop from wrong philosophies of living.* "As [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7). When the person's plans to achieve personal worth go awry, he develops symptoms as protection from feeling badly about himself. He will find some way to hide, to cop out, to run away. His neurotic patterns produce genuine emotional pain but he believes it is less painful than the suffering he would have to endure if his protective symptoms were not there and he had to acknowledge fully his own personal worthlessness. Better to hurt badly for other reasons and to maintain some sense of worth (according to a wrong basis for feeling worthwhile) than to be relieved of the suffering neurosis brings and to feel utterly worthless. The choice is between the devil and the deep blue sea. Treatment must include correcting a person's wrong basis for feeling significant and secure and helping him see what is the real route to personal worth. As long as someone believes that he might sacrifice or at least risk his sense of worth by living responsibly, he will choose to live irresponsibly. You will not correct the

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problem by exhorting responsible behavior. A change in thinking is required.

Many evangelical pulpits compound the problem by doing nothing more than listing the do's and don't's of Christian responsibility. People who are afraid to live responsibly because they might fail are taught to feel guilty for their irresponsible behavior. Biblical teaching must not only insist upon responsible, obedient, Christ-pleasing behavior, but must also include clear explanations of the Christian's basis for significance and security.

In my first book I developed the thought of how a Christian can rightly regard himself as worthwhile. Let me summarize briefly. Significance depends upon understanding who I am in Christ. I will come to feel significant as I have an eternal impact on people around me by ministering to them. If I fail in business, if my wife leaves me, if my church rolls drop, if I work in a menial occupation, if I can afford only a small house and one used car, I can still enjoy the thrilling significance of belonging to the Ruler of the universe, who has a job for me to do. He has equipped me for the job. As I mature by developing Christlike traits, I will enter more and more fully into the significance of belonging to and serving the Lord.

My need for security demands that I be unconditionally loved, accepted and cared for, now and forever. God has seen me at my worst and still loved me to the point of giving His life for me. That kind of love I can never lose. I am completely acceptable to Him regardless of my behavior. I am under no pressure to earn or to keep His love. My acceptability to God depends only on Jesus' acceptability to God and on the fact that Jesus' death was counted as full payment for my sins. Now that I know this love I can relax, secure in the knowledge that the eternal God of creation has pledged to use His infinite power and wisdom to insure my welfare. That's security. Nothing can happen to me that my loving God doesn't allow. I will experience nothing He will not enable me to handle. When problems mount and I feel alone, insecure, and afraid, I am to fill my mind with the security-

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building truth that at this moment a sovereign, loving, personal, infinite God is absolutely in control. In this knowledge I rest secure.

I might mention in passing that my acceptability in Christ is no warrant for careless living. Scripture also teaches that I am accountable to God for how I live. If I understand accountability, but not acceptability, I will live under pressure to behave well in order to be accepted. If I understand acceptability, but not accountability, I may become casually indifferent to sinful living. When I understand first my acceptability and then my accountability, I will be constrained to please the One who died for me, fearful that I might grieve Him, not wanting to, because I love Him.

True significance and security are available only to the Christian, one who is trusting in Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death as his sole basis of acceptability before a holy God. When the resources of God are not available because of unbelief, the individual is left with no hope for genuine significance and security. Life has neither purpose nor unconditional love apart from the Lord. People then develop alternative strategies for learning to feel as worthwhile as they can. Because these strategies can never really work and because they often run up against obstacles, people do not enjoy significance or security, two elements which all of us desperately need if we are to live effectively, productively, richly creative, and fulfilled lives.

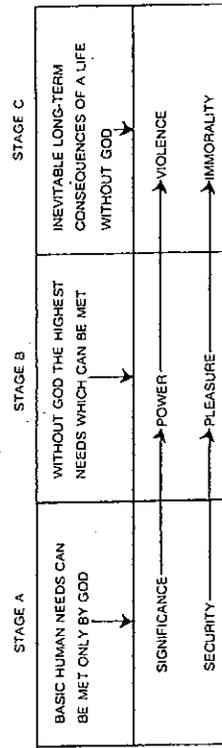
It intrigues me to observe Freud's conclusion that the two basic drives behind human behavior are power and pleasure or, in his terms, *thanatos* and *eros*. Freud used the word *thanatos*, meaning "death," to refer to the death wish, the final expression of power over nature. *Eros* refers simply to hedonistic pleasure. I wonder if these two drives are not really degenerate forms of the God-created personal needs of significance and security. In a life without God perhaps power and pleasure are all that can be hoped for realistically.

Our world and particularly our country are characterized by two major problems: violence and immorality. Could it be that

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the inevitable result of a thirst for power is violence? Destroying is the ultimate in power. When pleasure becomes the highest goal, isn't the predictable end product widespread immorality and perversion? God's judgment fell on Sodom and Gomorrah when violence and immorality had reached their peak. The Israelites were sent in to destroy the Canaanites only when the "iniquity of the Amorites was full." God specifically told the Jews that they would conquer Canaan, not because of their own righteousness, but because of the Canaanite's wickedness (Deut. 9:4,5). The land was characterized by violence and immorality. Is this what "full iniquity" means?

In Romans 1:21 Paul states that when people knew God, they refused to glorify Him as God. By not bowing the knee to God's purposes and lordship, they lost all hope of true significance. Paul then adds, "Neither were [they] thankful." Rather than resting in the love of a saving God and living in an attitude of thankfulness for His care and protection, they struck out on their own, thus giving up any real security. The rest of the chapter documents the downward spiral of people who try to make it without God. The end result is violence (backbiting, murder, etc.) and immorality (homosexuality, premarital sex). It is sadly interesting to note the increasing desire for perverted sex in our modern society. Sadomasochism seems to combine the ultimate in degenerated significance and security: total violent power over another person (sadism) and absolute, unresisting, submission to another (masochism). Perhaps my thinking can be clarified with a diagram.



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The Christian has all the resources necessary to live in Stage A. When he denies God by swallowing the world's value system (live for money, recognition, fun), he moves over to Stage B where the best he can do is gain power or pleasure. But power and pleasure do not satisfy the basic human need for feeling worthwhile. The Christian can repent and return to true significance and security. Apart from a personal relationship with God through salvation in Christ, no one can move from Stage B to A. The inevitable drift, sometimes over generations but often in an individual's life, is toward Stage C. When Stage C is reached, the stench of sin reaches God's nostrils and provokes Him to judgment. All hope is gone, God "gives them over" (Rom. 1:28) to their own desires as a form of judgment. Hell will be a place where the needs for significance and security will be acutely felt but forever unmet. How utterly horrible. And yet it is the natural consequence of choosing life without God because only in God can our needs be met. Heaven will be a perpetual Stage A, where the need to be worthwhile will continue to be real, but will then be perfectly, at every moment, eternally met by a conscious sense of the significance and security available in relationship to Christ. We will enjoy what Adam experienced before the Fall, but with an important difference: we will not be capable of losing that fellowship. The ground of our perfect relationship with God will not be our innocence but Christ's eternally sufficient atonement. What a hope. Eternal joy. Eternal worth in perfect communion with the One who alone can meet our needs.