

# DO I TRUST YOU?

BY DEAN MERRILL

**N**othing gets the blood running faster than when someone questions whether you're trustworthy. • A 15-year-old asks permission to go to a party at her friend's house. Her mom says, "What kind of party is it going to be, and who'll be there?" If she doesn't get crystal-clear answers, she is likely to proceed with "Will the parents be around, and what time would you get home?" ... at which point the impatient teenager goes into orbit: "Mom! I can't believe this — *you don't trust me!* I make good grades, I clean my room, I'm vice-president of the youth group — and you think I'm going to get bombed Saturday night!" →

*Trust isn't necessarily  
an all-or-nothing  
proposition.*

# WELL, SORT OF

• A wife turns 50 and starts to think more seriously about the years ahead. She asks her husband how their retirement funds are coming along. "Fine," he replies, with a typical male brevity. "Everything's under control."

"Well, how much do we have put away?" He quotes a figure.

"Do you think that will be enough? How much will we have each month when you and I reach 65?"

He snaps back, "Look, I've been watching over this for years. Everything's going to be fine. What's the matter — don't you trust me?"

• Two deacons stand talking in a dark parking lot after a church board meeting. They've just interviewed a candidate for minister of music. "What do you think?" one deacon says. "He's got talent, and he's really personable."

"Yes, I think the congregation would quickly warm up to him," the other replies. "But there's just something about his manner, that little smile — I don't know if I trust him ...."

#### PLEASE BELIEVE IN ME

The trust of another person is something for which we all yearn. In fact, we are insulted whenever we sense any hint of suspicion. Trust is a bedrock indicator of our character as a human being. If our pastor, our spouse, our parent, our boss, our co-worker, our child doesn't trust us, we are instantly on alert and determined to find out why.

Our faith tells us that God is totally reliable. David could pray with confidence, "O Sovereign LORD, you are God! Your words are trustworthy, and you have promised these good things to your servant" (2 Sam. 7:28). We love the calming assurance of Jesus' words on the night of the Last Supper: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (John 14:1). How reassuring to know that He will never disappoint us.

But you and I aren't God. And that forces us to admit something a little deflating: We aren't totally trustworthy. Even if we've been saved, even if we have invited the Holy Spirit to take full control of our lives, even if, believe it or

not, we've been ordained to the ministry — none of this guarantees we are fail-safe in every situation.

While you and I may agree with this premise intellectually, it still hurts down in our emotions when someone points out that we might falter.

During our son's junior year at a Christian college on the West Coast, he met the young lady of his dreams — the one who would in time become his wife. I must tell you that Nathan was — and is to this day — a son to be proud of: high-achieving, talented, disciplined, and firmly committed to Christian morals.

When it was time to travel the 1,100 miles home at the end of the year, he mentioned that they were planning to drive together, because her family lives only two hours away. That would entail an overnight stop somewhere in the middle of Utah.

"Obviously, we'd stay in separate rooms," he added, already knowing how the gears in our minds were turning.

"Well, Nathan," I replied, "... uh, I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

How could I answer without impugning his integrity? All the warning signs went zooming across the inner screen of my brain: *If you act like you think a kid is going to do the wrong thing, he'll prove you right.... Be glad he's even consulting you — most college students today would just go ahead and do what they wanted.* I hemmed. I hawed. I squirmed.

"Look, we're not going to do anything," he emphasized. "You know me better than that. We'll even stay in separate motels if you want us to ...."

My wife and I felt like we were walking a dangerous edge. We didn't want to hurt him for the world. But neither did we want to approve what could be a tempting situation. So we asked for a little time to think this over.

A few days later, I said, "Nathan, I fully believe that you and your girlfriend love the Lord with all your hearts. But you're still human. And for that reason, the overnight stay is not a good idea. Let's think of a different plan. Mom and I will even come up

with the money for one of you to fly while the other drives home with all the luggage, or something."

I could tell he wasn't entirely thrilled with our decision, but he didn't protest. An alternative was worked out in time.

Some parents will no doubt say we were too strict, too legalistic, too suspicious. Perhaps we were — although maybe we were simply doing what the rabbis used to advise in their adage "Make ye a fence for the Law." What that meant was to understand what is off limits according to God and then build an extra fence of our own a couple of feet from the perimeter, for safety's sake.

#### TRUST IS DIVISIBLE

The larger point of the story is this: Trust is not a case of all-or-none. Trust is divisible. We are kidding ourselves if we do not see the wisdom of extending trust to people — and ourselves — in increments. "I trust you with some challenges, but not with others." An evening date, yes; an overnight stay in a strange town, no.

For a worker: A company or church credit card, yes; the power to approve all charges on the monthly bill, no.

For a teacher: Freedom to respond to students' questions as you see fit, yes; freedom to teach any topic or curriculum without supervisory review, no.

For a boss: Liberty to hire a staff member, yes; liberty to fire that staff member without consultation, no.

We have too often assumed that there are only two choices, and we have to go with one or the other:

1. *Full Trust*, or
2. *Suspicion*

Either we completely trust somebody to do the right thing, or we think they're probably going to mess up. Which will it be?

In fact, there are three categories:

1. *Full Trust (blind trust)*: "He would never fall."
2. *Realism*: "He could fall, although I sure hope not."
3. *Suspicion*: "He is likely to fall."

Only God is deserving of the first category. We can be absolutely, 100 percent sure that He will always do the right thing. The rest of us belong in the



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second or the third categories. We don't intend to sin. But it is possible. Even the apostle Paul was candid enough to admit, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature" (Rom. 7:18). None of us is invincible.

Don't get hurt feelings over such a statement. Should I trust you "implicitly," as the saying goes? No. And if I take precautions, try not to be offended.

This happens in business all the time. The precautions are called "grants of authority." If you're a manager, the company authorizes you to sign requisitions up to a ceiling of, say, \$3,000. Beyond that, your signature is not enough; *they don't trust you* to make a lone decision. Instead, you must produce certain documents and justifications, and then a higher-ranking officer will decide. In many companies, when it comes to travel reimbursements, a higher signature is always required, regardless of amount. The temptation to overspend is otherwise too great.

Come to think of it, there are cases in which I know better than to trust *myself*. One example would be the case of driving all night. I know my metabolism well enough to say that if I took off at 10 P.M. from my home in Colorado to drive to Dallas or Kansas City, I would never make it!

I've met Christian men who don't trust themselves to stay in a hotel with a TV system that offers "adult entertainment" without first calling the front desk and asking that those films be blocked. I don't consider that to be weakness. I consider that smart.

## STYLE DIFFERENCES

**T**rust, it must be said, comes harder to some people than others. A few years ago, I heard author Jill Briscoe speak about the difference between herself and her pastor-husband, Stuart.

"You all know the beloved hymn title, 'Trust and Obey,'" she said (I'm paraphrasing, but this is how I remember her message). "If you're an easy-

going, laid-back person like Stuart, you find it natural to trust — and harder to obey. He just instinctively believes the best about virtually every person he meets. Meanwhile, his follow-through on the particulars of life can get a bit casual at times.

"On the other hand," Jill continued, "if you're detail-oriented and even a little compulsive as I am, obedience comes easy. My whole personality is built around following rules, sticking to the plan. But trust seems risky, scary. What if the other person doesn't follow through? What if even God, just this once, fails to remember His promise?!"

Each of us, whether naturally trusting or naturally wary, can make wise decisions once we grasp the dynamics of trust. The easygoing person can learn to think first before "giving away the store," while the meticulous person can relax a bit in the knowledge that trust can be parceled out in stages.

## THE COURAGE TO SPEAK UP

**W**hatever our temperaments, we must not be afraid to limit our trust. A line from Shakespeare says it well: "Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none."

A friend of mine thinks about this subject with regret nearly every day of his life. A few years ago, when he was trying to start a new business and had borrowed a fair amount of money in the early going, he and his wife concocted a plan to raise some quick cash. She, a person with talent, would spend a season working in the entertainment business. They wouldn't get to see each other very often, but the pay would be great. Then they could breathe easier about their finances once she returned.

It sounded reasonable enough ... but on the other hand, something seemed amiss. Was this really a good idea, to be apart this long? A week or two would be no problem, but seven *months*? My wife and I wondered if we should say something. But wouldn't that be nosy on our part?

The young wife went to perform under the bright lights, made some money, met lots of interesting people, saw what her career might be ... and never moved back. The day came that my friend's phone rang, and a voice on the other end said, "I'm so-and-so, an attorney, and I need some information from you for these divorce papers I've been asked to draw up."

Had he trusted his wife? Yes — too much. None of the rest of us had mustered the nerve to say, "Wait a minute. Let's talk about the implications here." We didn't want to cast aspersions or seem untrusting.

The hesitation is even stronger when dealing with those we regard with special honor, such as spiritual leaders or perhaps our parents. If a question crosses our minds about a pastor or evangelist, we feel immediately guilty of "judging" or "touching God's anointed," as the Old Testament phrase goes (1 Sam. 24, 26; see also 1 Chron. 16:22). After all, who are we to doubt his integrity? He's lived longer and served God more faithfully than we have.

If only some lowly employee of King David had raised a question when given the order to go to Bathsheba's house and escort her to the palace (2 Sam. 11:4). If only that person had said, "Excuse me, Your Majesty — but why? Are you sure about this?" A great tragedy might have been averted.

In our working and relating with each other in our homes, in the church, and in our outside relationships, we can be pushed into foolish risks by the fear of hearing, "What's the matter — don't you trust me?" We would do better to remember Paul's warning, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor. 10:12). After all, it's possible.

Total trust is for God alone. ■

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