This is a profound book about a simple idea: that the secret of being human is God's gracious love to us and our response of love to him and others. Compelling stories and practical advice build on theological insight and sociological reflection, all served up with a dash of humour. The result is a book that will inspire you, and then help you, to love well and therefore live well.

TIM CHESTER
Pastor of Grace Church Boroughbridge; Faculty Member of Crosslands Training; Author

Mark Greene is a legend. When I grow up I'd like to be more like him. I can always trust Mark to have his finger on the pulse of God and the world. I can't think of a better opportunity than this book to learn the deep and beautiful Christian foundation essential for our times – Love.

DANIELLE STRICKLAND
Speaker, Author and Social Justice Advocate

Detaching relationships from banking leads to a global crash. Detaching relationships from sex leads to hurt and pain. Detaching relationships from politics leads to ugly tribalism. In this book, Mark Greene brilliantly shows that loving relationships should be central to a healthy world because they are central to its wonderful Creator, who is Three-in-One.

ANDY FLANNAGAN
Executive Director, Christians in Politics

Full of grace, wisdom and hope, Mark explores the transformational power of a distinctive relational lens for every sphere of life. When, as organizations, communities and individuals, our daily purpose is to love, value and respect other people, we weave a pattern of life that goes with the grain of the universe.

DR. SHIRLEY JENNER
Lecturer, Global Development Institute, University of Manchester

To the Christian, this book may be thought to state the 'Basil Fawlty' obvious. Jesus told us in clear terms what are the two most important things in life. But working that out in reality is the issue, isn't it? With real life examples and Mark's chutzpah sense of humour, any reader will get the five main principles involved in putting Jesus' saying into practice in all the different areas of life. Mark makes clear that there is no tension, logical or practical, in fulfilling our calling to love our neighbour and improve their lot whilst presenting the good news of Jesus' life-changing offer, however limited our energy. Nor is there tension between our calling to love God and look for Jesus' return whilst doing all we can to improve the welfare of those around us. We are all apprentices of Jesus in this, and this book just may – probably will – inspire you and encourage you to put into practice what is not just probably the best idea in the world.

SIR JEREMY COOKE
International Arbitrator; Former High Court Judge

In this inspiring book, Mark Greene draws us into a compelling vision of a God who is inherently relational and utterly interested in the authenticity, generosity and practicality of our relationships. It offers great ideas for transforming everyday frontline contexts, helping us see them through the lens of the kind of love to which Jesus calls us, with very helpful, practical suggestions for workplaces, churches, marriages and parenthood. While our generation may well be the most connected in history, Mark's attractive vision of lived-out love for one's neighbour is more needed than ever, and this book highlights the unique opportunity the church has to model genuine community which leads to our human flourishing.

ANDY WOLFE
Dean of Younger Leadership College, Diocese of Southwell & Nottingham; Former Vice Principal, The Nottingham Emmanuel School

Mark Greene's simple message about the importance of good relationships has challenged me to reassess how I apply the greatest commandment in my interactions with people at home, work, in my community and more broadly. His great skills as a storyteller makes this book as accessible as it is profound. This is a must-read for anyone seeking to work out their faith wherever God puts them, but perhaps it should be a must-read too for our policy makers, and community and business leaders, as the prize is so great for us as a society if we learn (or relearn) to live more relationally.

JOËLLE WARREN MBE, DL
Executive Chair, Warren Partners

It has been a joy and privilege for us at the Jubilee Centre to be companions with Mark Greene and LICC along the road of discovering the depth and breadth of God's vision for true human flourishing – without question the Best Idea in the World. Mark's perceptive and imaginative writing teases out what this means, demonstrating powerfully that it's much more than an idea – it's a calling, a lifestyle, a vision and a purpose that can and should capture our heart and soul all life long!

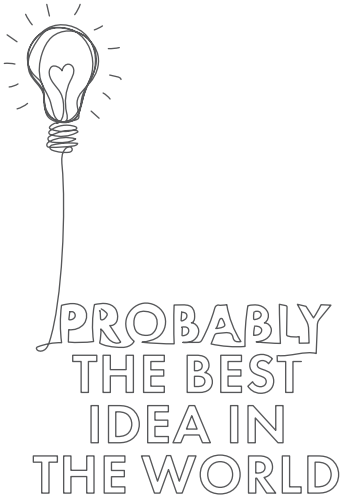
JONATHAN TAME
Executive Director, Jubilee Centre

Inspiring, moving, practical, life-transforming. The principles of relational living in this book not only have profound implications for every area of life but have the power to transform the world of modern healthcare.

JOHN WYATT,
Emeritus Professor of Neonatal Paediatrics, University College London

(Probably) the best book I have read on this subject! I read *The R Factor* many moons ago, and still have a copy on my bookshelf. I am so pleased that Mark Greene has taken up the challenge to republish this excellent material in his own inimitable style. He encourages us with wit, humour and up-to-date real-life examples, to step beyond our self-obsessed culture – and to take seriously Jesus' command to love God and to love each other. Read it and you will be challenged to join the adventure of playing your part in creating a better world.

KATHARINE HILL
UK Director, Care for the Family


PROBABLY
THE BEST
IDEA IN
THE WORLD

Also by Mark Greene

Thank God it's Monday

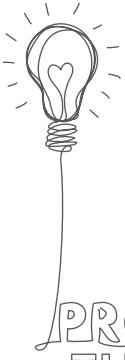
Let My People Grow
(Mark Greene and Tracy Cotterell)

Pocket Prayers for Work

Of Love, Life and Caffè Latte

Fruitfulness on the Frontline

Adventure



PROBABLY THE BEST IDEA IN THE WORLD

MARK GREENE

Muddy
Pearl

First published in 2018 by
Muddy Pearl, Edinburgh, Scotland.
www.muddypearl.com
books@muddypearl.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-910012-55-0

Cover Design by David McNeill
Typeset in Minion by David McNeill
www.revocreative.co.uk

Printed in Great Britain by Bell & Bain Ltd, Glasgow.

For the Trinamic Trio,
Anna-Marie, Tomi and Matt,
Knights of the Oblong Table, SPLY.

CONTENTS

A PAUSE FOR GRATITUDE

This little offering is about a simple but very big idea. As it happens, it's not my idea. It was Michael Schluter's idea. For years, I tried to cajole Michael (CBE) into writing a short version of the groundbreaking book, *The R Factor*, where he and David Lee introduced their thinking and primarily applied it to social policy. Michael, with the stubbornness of a cliff and the gentleness of a butterfly, consistently demurred. In the end, he asked me to write it. Then he started cajoling me. It took him rather less time to break me down, because I'd taught the material in myriad contexts and I'd seen its liberating impact on thousands of people, and I knew this wasn't some faddish novelty that would sparkle today and be gone tomorrow.

Many others have helped along the way, not least my colleagues at LICC (London Institute for Contemporary Christianity). In particular, I owe a great deal to Christina Winn, whose combination of perspicacity and personal engagement have been invaluable; to Stephanie Heald, whose selfless, thoughtful brilliance added yeast to the whole loaf; to Helen Valler, whose antennae for clarity are so highly tuned; to Team Zondervan, the original publisher, and now to Team Muddy Pearl – Stephanie, Anna, Healey, Fiona and Josh – whose careful and joyous way of working is a splendid example of this book's ideas in action.

Originally, of course, the understanding of the vital significance of this idea comes from the mind of Jesus, though, as experience has shown, you don't have to be one

of his followers to reap some of its benefits, even if you will miss out on the greatest harvest. There is, after all, much, much more to the wisdom of Jesus than this big idea. Nevertheless, there are few that offer such a simple, rich, practical and integrated way forward in every aspect of life – Monday to Monday.

I hope you will be as grateful for it as I am.

Mark Greene

THE LONDON INSTITUTE
FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY

MARCH 2018

FOREWORD

If you want to see what's really important to people, go to a funeral and listen to the eulogy.

Rarely will a eulogy commemorate the deceased by recalling the size of the house in which they lived, or the salary they earned, or the kind of car they drove, or the holidays they enjoyed, or even (in most cases) the jobs they toiled at. Most of the things we spend most of the time chasing after are soon forgotten. Rather, eulogies tend to remember the deceased for three reasons: their creative qualities – she was a brilliant musician, a wonderful artist, a fine poet; their moral diligence – he was trustworthy, industrious, hard-working, conscientious; and, supremely, their relational nature – she was always there for me, a dad I could rely on, the best friend I could have hoped for.

I have long been struck how these qualities resonate with the question in Christian theology about what being made in the *imago dei* – the image of God – actually means. Drawing on the creation stories of Genesis 1–3, it is interpreted in rich ways. Being made in the image of God means we are created to be creative, productive and generous. It means we are created with a purpose, with work to do, creation to take care of. And it means we are created to relate to him, to other humans and to the rest of creation in a way that reflects something of God's own relational, Trinitarian nature.

Perhaps it is that at funerals, all the mess and busyness of life is swept aside, and we catch a glimpse of the horizon,

or what we really, in our heart of hearts, in the light of eternity, aspire to be. We want to be remembered for how we created, how we loved, how we communicated, how we connected with one another.

Today we connect in innumerable ways. Indeed, in one sense, we are more connected than ever before. We tweet, we blog, we vlog, we skype, and we post till the cows come home and often till the larks rise. We cannot help but communicate. And yet it is increasingly clear that we are connected but not connecting. We may be richer, better educated, more comfortable than, say, our grandparents' generation, but we are no happier than they were, and in many instances we are more worried and more lonely.

How did this happen?

Some of it is due to the specific problems of the day. Young people today face a steeper, and more expensive climb into adulthood than they did twenty or forty years ago. The world is a less certain place. The West is no longer calling all the shots. Many of us have the spectre of a financial crash or terrorist atrocity hovering at the periphery of our vision. But there is also something deeper going on. The very thing that is (allegedly) behind modern progress – the freedom to live our lives exactly the way we choose – is also behind what is making us more miserable. Freedom is a wonderful thing – but when it is disembodied from the truth of human nature it can become as much a curse as a blessing.

This truth is in that *imago dei* and in the funeral eulogies: the truth that we are made for each other and for God. We are creative, responsible, *relational* beings, existing because of and for others, and the Other. We are

persons slowly sculpted by love or eroded by the lack of it. Our freedom is a gift, from the God of Love, for the Love of God. I am only really me, if we are really us. That message of the freedom and joy to be found in loving others and loving God is at the heart of Jesus' teaching, his living and his death. It is at the heart of the Christian scriptures. And it makes intuitive sense: as soon as you start seeing the world through relational lenses, you understand it and are able to navigate it better.

I spent five enormously enjoyable, productive and beneficial years working at The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity and the Jubilee Centre, working with two people who really heard and lived that message, communicating it with rigour, intelligence, flair and warmth. Mark Greene and Michael Schluter are people worth listening to. Michael's wonderful idea of 'relational thinking' explained, expanded and richly applied by Mark with his customary verve, wit and joy is an idea worth pondering and living out. It is also what we need today, as we find ourselves with wealth that can sometimes feel impoverishing, and freedom that can sometimes feel imprisoning. It is, indeed, probably the best idea in the world.

Nick Spencer

DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH, THEOS

Author of *The Political Samaritan: How power hijacked a parable* (Bloomsbury, 2017) and *The Evolution of the West: How Christianity has shaped our values* (SPCK, 2016)

LONDON, MARCH 2018

Still the memory shimmers,
In the depth of our souls,
Of how close, how close
We all once were.

MARK GREENE

CHAPTER 1

THE BIG QUESTION

or

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A LENS MAKES

I was twenty-three at the time, young and eager in my first suit, working in advertising, with a spring in my step and a flower in my buttonhole. It was 1978, and wearing a flower in a buttonhole, except for weddings, had ceased to be any kind of convention at least 150 years before. Still, I rather liked it, and it distracted attention from the fact that I only had two suits in an era when suits were what you wore, and only having two was at least one too few for a man in an image-conscious business.

Michael Baulk was already a legend in the agency, slim and crisp in beautifully tailored light-hued suits, driving a sleek Ferrari and inspiring confidence in clients, hard work in subordinates and a good measure of awe from us new trainees. It was an awe only mildly tempered by our sense that, for some of our more senior colleagues, this man's determination and focus seemed a little too intense, a little too steely, merciless perhaps, to trust him with the agency's heart. Nevertheless, we knew that to be chosen to work for him would be like being recruited for MI6 – he emanated excellence.

Anyway, about three months into the job, we trainees were clucking away in a cubicle at the end of the day and 'he'

appeared, still crisp and perfectly groomed in his beige and unrumpled suit, the creases of his trousers sharper than a surgeon's scalpel. And there in the disarray of that dark and tiny cubicle, far from the bright lights and wide open spaces of his office, he began to talk about advertising, about what it would take to succeed in this business and about the need for mentors to help us along the way. I was transfixed. It was as if the Pope had paused by my shed and was pouring out his wisdom. Who were we to merit such attention? Then Michael said this: 'The key to great advertising is strategic relevance and creative brilliance.'

There it was. In a nutshell.

We'd been to countless seminars, read piles of documents, talked to lots of people and visited every department in the agency, but here it was, five words that cut through to the very heart of the matter: 'strategic relevance and creative brilliance' – make sure you are saying the right thing, and then say it brilliantly. Of course, that doesn't make creating great advertising any easier. Strategic relevance takes hard work to fashion, and creative brilliance can't be conjured up by just adding an egg. Still, it immediately gave us two simple criteria to judge any work we did.

If only the rest of life were that simple.

Perhaps it can be.

Imagine someone asked you, 'What is the key to the good life?'

How would you reply? What is the one thing you would want to pass on to someone that would help them lead a fulfilling life? Of course, your answer might depend on who's asking and where you are at the time. After all, it's

one thing to answer the question on the fifth floor of a chi-chi ad agency in an affluent Western democracy, it's quite another to answer it in a Syrian refugee camp, or a run-down council flat on an estate where 60% of the people haven't been able to find regular work for two generations, or to answer it as a Christian in a country where you risk your life just by going to church.

So, the ideal answer would have to address the big questions, like what we're living for, what kind of people we want to become, what kind of contribution we want to make, what kind of society we want to see. And it would have to give us simple criteria for answering all the little questions we face every day – where to live, what to eat, what to drink, what to buy, how to travel, how to use our time well, how to choose a job …

We need a 'lens' that not only helps bring the big picture into focus but also helps us see all the little things with the right perspective. We need bifocals.

This book is about one man's answer to that question, an answer that is like that wonderful moment at an optician's when, having already popped a variety of lenses into the machine, they slide in the last one, and you can tell a 'u' from a 'v' and an 'e' from a 'c', from a hundred yards.

There's the story, a true story as it happens, of a teacher of the law asking a carpenter – a builder really – this question: 'What is the most important commandment of all?'

Now the carpenter had acquired such a reputation for teaching that, despite having no formal education or qualification, most of the people of his time addressed him as rabbi. His reply is the key to the good life, the key to a

better society and the key to the restored heart – the best idea in the world.

Of course, in an age of media hype and advertising huff and puff, it's hard for us to take claims about the best or the greatest too seriously. After all, we've had endless lists ranking the best and the worst of everything – from films to futons, from the rich list to the hitch list, from goal of the season to blouse of the year, from the top 100 best ads to the top 100 places to eat quinoa in Quebec. Still, for many a man and woman in first-century Israel, the question, 'What's the most important commandment of all?' was of great significance. Nor was the man who asked the rabbi Jesus that question the only person recorded posing it (Matthew 22:34–40). Clearly, it was an important question.

And it wasn't necessarily an easy question to answer. After all, back in the first century AD, there were rather a lot of commandments for a devout Jew to choose from. Not just the Big Ten, but some 613 that the rabbis had identified. It's one thing to look for a needle in a haystack; at least the needle is qualitatively different from straw and you can always use a magnet. But choosing one from among 613 divinely ordained commandments might appear to be more akin to trying to pick out the best pearl from a bucket of perfect pearls.

Nevertheless, despite having more commandments to choose from than flavours of Jelly Belly jelly beans, Jesus, the rabbi-carpenter, replies with an answer that is swift, simple and succinct, unembellished by parable or delayed by questions of his own:

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"

MARK 12:30–31

Jesus' answer doesn't come as a surprise to the teacher of the law. Actually, looking back on it 2,000 years later, it still doesn't seem that surprising: 'love God' – that's the first commandment and the second sentence of the *Shema*, the national prayer that every Jew would have known. And 'love your neighbour', well, that summarizes the essence of six-and-a-half of the other commandments which all relate to how one treats one's neighbour – not making them work on the Sabbath, not stealing from them, not wishing to acquire anything that they have.

What's brilliant here is not that Jesus comes up with something new but that he so succinctly and directly summarizes the heart behind all God's instruction. It's obvious. And yet liberating because it's so clear, so simple. Indeed, the questioner's response to Jesus' answer is immediate, congratulatory, honouring, joyous really: 'Well said, teacher.' And he goes on to highlight why: 'to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices'. In other words, active love for a neighbour is more important than all the rituals and rites of the Temple in whose very courts they were standing. It's like standing in the foyer of the HQ of the largest soft drinks manufacturer on the planet, Coca-Cola's gargantuan complex in Atlanta, and being asked by their senior

vice president in charge of marketing, 'What's the most important beverage in the world?' and replying, 'Water.'

You can't make Coke without water. And you can't love God without that expressing itself in loving your neighbour. Indeed, love for God that doesn't express itself in loving your neighbour is as unpalatable to God as globs of undiluted Coke syrup.

Jesus' questioner agrees wholeheartedly, but perhaps he doesn't see the extraordinary implications of what Jesus is saying. 'Oh, yes,' the man might have thought, 'we know that. You're right. But there's nothing so desperately radical about that. I know God is to be loved with all that I am and all that I have. And I know that I am to love my neighbour. Life can perhaps go on as usual.'

Similarly, today there's hardly a Christian in the Western world who wouldn't agree with Jesus' call to 'love your neighbour'. Actually, there's probably hardly more than one human in a hundred anywhere who wouldn't agree, even though there are many who wouldn't agree with the command to love God. Not many people take serious issue with the call to 'love your neighbour as yourself', even if they might actually go about loving their neighbours in somewhat different ways. However, it is one thing to know something and quite another to work out the implications of an idea so familiar, so taken for granted, that it no longer has much force in reality, no longer really shapes the way we live our lives.

Now, of course there are many fine, enriching books about the great commandments that merit careful reading and reflection. This little offering doesn't attempt to cover

all the same ground. Rather it seeks to explore the lenses these commandments give us not just for our personal relationships but for their liberating implications for every aspect of our lives – private, communal, national and international.

In fact, Jesus' response is perhaps even more radically countercultural today than it was 2,000 years ago. To a culture trying to push God to the periphery, Jesus says, 'Put God in the centre.' Because human beings are spiritual beings. To a culture obsessed with rights and the dead-end trinity of me, myself and I, Jesus says, 'Focus on others.' To a culture suffering from epidemic levels of loneliness, depression and alienation, Jesus says, 'Focus on community.' To a culture obsessed with acquiring quality things, Jesus says, 'Focus on building quality relationships.'

Indeed, the simplicity of Jesus' answer should not distract us from its significance. If these are the most important commandments, then they reflect what is most important to God. What, then, is most important to God? *How we love*. How we love him and how we love our neighbour. And love is fundamentally about relationship.

So the thing that is most important to God is:

1a. The quality of our relationship with him.

1b. The quality of our relationships with others.

Christianity is not a 'system' to be followed, a body of rules to obey, hurdles to jump or boxes to tick, but a particular kind of friendship with God and people. Of course, at first glance, this focus on relationship sounds all rather fluffy and vague, but, as we shall see, the call to love is not a call to sit around meditating on eternal truths in a

blissful reverie, but rather a summons to become involved in a down-to-earth movement to make the world a better place. Romantic love may begin with a walk in the park, but it ends up with a discussion about who's going to pick up the kids from school this afternoon. True love is not just about drowning in the intoxicating gaze of the beloved, but about making decisions, doing things for our beloved that makes their life better. Indeed, if you love someone, you think about the impact on them of everything you do and say. If you love someone you want the best for them – the best education for them and their kids, the best health care for them and their kids, the best air, the best water, the best nutrition, the best opportunities to grow and flourish. If you love your neighbour, who's 67 and lives in a village that's five miles from anywhere and ten miles from a pharmacy, you don't want the bus service that's her only way out of the village to be reduced to one bus at 3 o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon. If you love your neighbour, who's a co-worker in the same shop, you don't want to see him snipped and sniped at by some bad-tempered, capricious boss. You want to find a way to change the dynamic.

So then, against God's most important criteria, how am I doing?

How is my relationship, my adventure with God?

Even the question brings me up short. How is it*, really*? Deep, dynamic? Or distant? Excited or indifferent?

How is my family doing? Do we relate well? Yes, we love each other, we're family. But are we like the Finns who, when asked whether the Russians are their friends or their brothers, tend to reply: 'Our brothers. Because

ROMANTIC LOVE MAY BEGIN WITH A WALK IN THE PARK, BUT IT ENDS UP WITH A DISCUSSION ABOUT WHO'S GOING TO PICK UP THE KIDS FROM SCHOOL THIS AFTERNOON.

you can choose your friends.' Is there anything truly dynamic, purposeful or enriching about the way we relate? Sometimes I wonder whether I am really helping my kids grow as people, or just servicing their food, financial and transport requirements. How easy to let mealtimes become mere pit stops between school and homework. How easy for me to let the sheer number of times I have to drive my teenagers to their interminable swimming sessions in overheated, chlorinated halls turn into a chore rather than a great opportunity to chat, chill, listen to music they like and try to like it too, and sometimes find out what's really going on in their lives.

And what about my relationships at work? After all, apart from some romantic liaison, the very idea of 'love' in the workplace sounds like an alien concept. But if my relationships with the people I spend so much time with are not characterized by any genuine, benevolent interest, what does that say about me? Am I just there to share the carpet, collect my pay cheque and one day maybe attend their funerals, only to realise that I knew nothing much about them except that they liked to leave their tea bag in their cup until the water was the colour of coal, but then still add lots of milk?

And at church, what is the quality of relationships there? Yes, we know we're meant to love one another. But what does that mean exactly? Is there more to it than polite affability? Safe, social but superficial. And if I'm in a group – small group, cell group, house group, connect group, life group, youth group, midweek mums, missional community – whatever we now call it, what do I really know about them?

About their life history? About the fiancé that got away, the mum that left, the dad they wish they had? Do I know the name of their boss, or their tutor at uni, or their best friend in all the world? Often we enter people's lives at a particular point and never find out much about what happened before that, or even what's really important to them now.

I wonder, when you think of the quality of your own relationships and the quality of relationships in your town or your nation, what word or thought pops first into your mind?

Loving?