

Biblical Productivity

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1: Are You Busy?

Lazy? Not me. I'm busy. Up early, up late. My schedule is filled from beginning to end. I love what I do and I love getting stuff done. I attack a daily to-do list with the same intensity I play basketball. Me lazy? I don't think so!

Or at least I didn't think so. That is, until I read about the difference between busyness and fruitfulness, and realized just how often my busyness was an expression of laziness, not diligence.

I forget now who first brought these points to my attention. But the realization that I could be simultaneously busy and lazy, that I could be a hectic sluggard, that my busyness was no immunity from laziness, became a life-altering and work-altering insight. What I learned is that:

- Busyness does not mean I am *diligent*
- Busyness does not mean I am *faithful*
- Busyness does not mean I am *fruitful*

Recognizing the sin of procrastination, and broadening the definition to include busyness, has made a significant alteration in my life. The sluggard can be busy—busy neglecting the most important work, and busy knocking out a to-do list filled with tasks of secondary importance.

When considering our schedules, we have endless options. But there are a few clear priorities and projects, derived from my God-assigned roles, that

should occupy the majority of my time during a given week. And there are a thousand tasks of secondary importance that tempt us to devote a disproportionate amount of time to completing an endless to-do list. And if we are lazy, we will neglect the important for the urgent.

Our Savior understood priorities. Although his public ministry was shorter than one presidential term, within that time he completed all the works give to him by the Father.

The Father evidently called him to heal a limited number of people from disease, raise a limited number of bodies from the dead, and preach a limited number of sermons. As Jesus stared into the cup of God's wrath, he looked back on his life work as complete because he understood the calling of the Father. He was not called to heal everyone, raise everyone, preach copious sermons, or write volumes of books.

While we must always be extra careful when comparing our responsibilities with Christ's messianic priorities, in the incarnation he entered into the limitations of human life on this earth.

So join me over the next few days as we discover the root and nature of laziness, so that we might devote ourselves to biblical priorities and join our Savior in one day praying to the Father, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:4).

2: Confessions of a Busy Procrastinator

In the past I thought that as long as I wasn't idle, I wasn't lazy. Not true. In fact, my laziness often shows up in the form of busyness.

And this was the same discovery Walter Henegar made in his life, as he explained in his candid autobiographical article "Putting Off Procrastination" in *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Fall 2001).

"I procrastinate," he writes. "I've been doing it most of my life. If a particular task is even remotely unpleasant, my first and persistent tendency is to put it off. It's not that I'm lazy; I'm actually very busy. I just wait as long as possible to do the really hard stuff. I always pull it off in the end, but it regularly makes me miserable" (p. 40).

Here is a glimpse into his life:

When I got married, my uncle, who married us, joked about my well-known tendency right in the middle of the ceremony. His sermon was about the necessity of change in marriage, and looking right at me, he said, "One who is a procrastinator...will put that off as long as he can."

And that's exactly what I did, though married life made it increasingly more difficult. My designated crunch times now belonged to my wife as well, and I had to push her away to get last-minute work done....Can't she just cut me some slack?

She did cut me some slack, but only as much as her chronically ill body would allow. Repeated hospital stays and constant bouts with pain forced her to lean heavily on me to take care of her—and our two children. If marriage is God’s cold chisel for sanctifying us, then children only sharpen the edge. The three of them drove my work responsibilities deeper into my free time and farther into the hours of the night. I slept less and less. I still managed to pull most things off, but the quality of my work suffered, and my list of un-done to-do’s grew. I was continually weary, discouraged, and feeling sorry for myself. A couple of times, in the throes of last-minute working, I even experienced something like panic attacks. I envied my more disciplined friends but saw little hope of becoming like them. (pp. 40–41)

As he began studying his heart, Mr. Henegar discovered that his sin operated from three predictable manifestations of what he calls his “flow chart of *if-thens*”:

- If my task is not due anytime soon, put it off.
- If the task is due tomorrow, cast aside all other responsibilities and focus on this one task.
- And after accomplishing a large task, take a break and reward yourself.

As he continued to study his own heart, he began to understand that although his day was filled with busyness—and even with genuinely good activities—he was procrastinating. “There I was, buzzing dili-

gently around the room, while that thing, the one thing I needed to do most, sat unheeded in the middle of it. I wasn't just a procrastinator; I was a work-around-er" (p. 41).

Then came the decisive point in his life when he learned more about this procrastinator within.

About two years ago, a counseling class in seminary challenged me to give Scripture a shot at diagnosing my problem and setting a course for change. What captured my imagination was the biblical metaphor of a tree, and the suggestion that my prickly branches of procrastination were being nourished by unseen roots growing deep in the chambers of my heart. A hope even flashed that I might uncover *the* root, and somehow cut it out once and for all. In retrospect, this second hope was a reflection of my procrastinator's heart, always looking for a shortcut or a silver bullet. (p. 41)

But there was no shortcut.

And next time we'll discover how Mr. Henegar confronted the procrastinator within.

3: The Procrastinator Within

If I am busy, I must be productive, right? A busy man is a faithful and fruitful man?

Nope. Busyness is no guarantee of productivity, faithfulness, or fruitfulness.

But why? What distinguishes a fruitfully busy schedule from a non-fruitful busy schedule?

I think it comes down to two important points: understanding our sin and understanding our roles. Today we'll look at our sin and later we will look more closely at roles).

In the last post we looked at Walter Henegar's candid account of how he procrastinated in getting to the root of procrastination.

In seminary, Mr. Henegar noticed a three-fold pattern of procrastination in his academic life:

- If it's not due tomorrow, then I'll take my time and put off the work.
- If it's due tomorrow, I'll start the project, stay up late, and drop all my other priorities.
- Once I've finished, I'm entitled to a reward.

And then Mr. Henegar enrolled in a seminary course on counseling, where he began to uncover the hidden side of his procrastination. He realized that "my prickly branches of procrastination were being nourished by unseen roots growing deep in the chambers of my heart" (p. 41).

He's referring here to a diagram called "The Three Trees," developed by the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF). The diagram, based on Luke 6:43–45, presents the situations of life (illustrated by sun or heat) that reveal the roots of sinfulness or godliness in our lives. These roots reveal what we really want and believe.

Under the heat of life's circumstances, we sometimes respond in a godly way, revealing healthy roots that lead to fruitfulness (illustrated by a fruitful tree). Or these situations tempt us to respond sinfully, revealing a bad root and a lack of fruit (illustrated by a fruitless tree). The gospel is the centerpiece of the diagram, giving hope to the fruitless (through repentance) and reminding us that all godly fruit is a result of the gospel in our lives.

When he began recognizing the heart issues involved, Mr. Henegar continued through his semester with a closer watch on the roots of sin that nourished his procrastination.

This is how he describes his discovery:

I began to feel like I was really figuring myself out, and it was still early enough in the semester to think I was staying on top of things. I'd notice when I started slipping blatantly into procrastination, and it was easy enough to stop—at first. But soon midterms hit, and everything quickly fell apart. I found myself pulling all-nighters again, and it was back at square one. Ironically, though, I still had to work on an assignment for my counseling class. I reluctantly dove back, this time try-

ing to get at deeper issues. It wasn't hard to begin naming things.

Pride was surely operating: every time I pulled an all-nighter to finish a job, I was protecting my reputation before my friends and superiors.

Fear of others was closely related. When I had those mild panic attacks, the fear of others' disapproval was foremost in my head.

Laziness wasn't the main thing, but it definitely played a part; sometimes I just didn't want to do anything.

Pleasure-seeking and **escapism** were big players, too, though I generally confined myself to acceptable thrills like watching movies and binging on Ben & Jerry's. (p. 42, emphasis mine)

Mr. Henegar did the right thing after this discovery. He repented of his sin. He repented to his wife for the presence and effect of his sin. And he turned to a group of friends from his local church whom he offered "a standing invitation to show me my sin—and to remind me of the gospel" (p. 44).

What Mr. Henegar discovered was the simple truth that underlying our procrastination—putting off the most important duties we are called to accomplish—was not so much a busy schedule but a sinful heart.

The good news for all of us who are procrastinators is this: The gospel addresses these sins, provides forgiveness of sin, and gives us the power to weaken sin and cultivate true diligence. In the gospel we find hope to address the procrastinator within.

4: Just Do It

Due to my tendency towards procrastination, the following quote by preacher Alexander MacLaren is posted under my computer monitor as a daily means of confronting that procrastinator within. My hope is that, by the grace of God, it will provoke diligence to attend to the most important matters each day for the glory of God. It reads:

No unwelcome tasks become any the less unwelcome by putting them off till tomorrow. It is only when they are behind us and done, that we begin to find that there is a sweetness to be tasted afterwards, and that the remembrance of unwelcome duties unhesitatingly done is welcome and pleasant. Accomplished, they are full of blessing, and there is a smile on their faces as they leave us. Undone, they stand threatening and disturbing our tranquility, and hindering our communion with God. If there be lying before you any bit of work from which you shrink, go straight up to it, and do it at once. The only way to get rid of it is to do it.

—Alexander MacLaren (1826-1910), Scottish preacher

5: In All Thy Ways

My tendency is to charge into the day intent on getting stuff done, attacking my to-do list motivated by self sufficiency rather than by humble dependence upon the grace of God revealed in the gospel.

And given the active presence of pride and self-sufficiency in my life, it is imperative for me at the outset of each day to devote time to humbling myself before the Lord and acknowledging my dependence upon him for all that awaits me.

As I devote myself to this spiritual discipline, the words of Proverbs 3:5–7 frequently inform my meditation and prayer:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.

This passage is well suited for my fellow procrastinators and useful as we examine our hearts and apply the content of the verses to our hearts throughout each day.

Alongside an open Bible, I find the exposition of these verses by nineteenth-century pastor Charles Bridges in his commentary on Proverbs to be helpful and insightful. He writes:

Let our confidence be uniform. *In all thy ways acknowledge him* (Proverbs 3:6). Take one step at a time, every step under divine warrant and direction. Ever plan for yourself in simple dependence on God. It is nothing less than self-idolatry to conceive that we can carry on even the ordinary matters of the day without his counsel.

He loves to be consulted. Therefore take all thy difficulties to be resolved by him. Be in the habit of going to him in the first place—before self-will, self-pleasing, self-wisdom, human friends, convenience, expediency. Before any of these have been consulted go to God at once. Consider no circumstances too clear to need his direction.

In all thy ways, small as well as great; in all thy concerns, personal or relative, temporal or eternal, let him be supreme.

—Charles Bridges (1794–1869), *A Commentary on Proverbs* (Banner of Truth, 1846/1968), pp. 24–25.

6: The Sluggard

My study in the book of Proverbs began shortly after my conversion in 1972. And it wasn't long after this that I began reading and learning from Dr. Derek Kidner's little commentary. For decades now Dr. Kidner has been one of the scholars holding my hand, leading me through the book, and helping me to discover what he calls "the neglected wealth of the Proverbs" (p. 9).

One of the most distinct features of the commentary is his brief subject studies. In these summaries he covers the topics of God and man, wisdom, the fool, the sluggard, the friend, words, the family, and life and death (see pages 31–56). I wish all Christians could read these brief and pointed studies and experience the grace and wisdom I have derived from them.

When I began my Christian life, I held to a narrow and limited understanding of laziness. Then I read Kidner's subject study on the sluggard.

I'll never forget it.

As I began reading, I saw my face in the picture. My definition of laziness was expanded, and its subtlety was exposed. I discovered that I could be—and often was—a sluggard.

Here are the words I read:

The sluggard in Proverbs is a figure of tragedy, with his sheer animal laziness (he is more than anchored to his bed: he is *binged* to it, 26:14),

his preposterous excuses (“there is a lion outside!” 26:13; 22:13) and his final helplessness.

1. *He will not begin things.* When we ask him (6:9, 10) “How long...?” “When...?”, we are being too definite for him. He doesn’t know. All he knows is his delicious drowsiness; all he asks is a little respite: “a little...a little...a little...”. He does not commit himself to a refusal, but deceives himself by the smallness of his surrenders. So, by inches and minutes, his opportunity slips away.

2. *He will not finish things.* The rare effort of beginning has been too much; the impulse dies. So his quarry goes bad on him (12:27) and his meal goes cold on him (19:24; 26:15).

3. *He will not face things.* He comes to believe his own excuses (perhaps there is a lion out there, 22:13), and to rationalize his laziness; for he is “wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason” (26:16). Because he makes a habit of the soft choice (he “will not plow by reason of the cold,” 20:4) his character suffers as much as his business, so that he is implied in 15:19 to be fundamentally dishonest...

4. *Consequently he is restless* (13:4; 21:25, 26) with unsatisfied desire; *helpless* in face of the tangle of his affairs, which are like a “hedge of thorns” (15:19); and *useless*—expensively (18:9) and exasperatingly (10:26)—to any who must employ him...

The wise man will learn while there is time. He knows that the sluggard is no freak, but, as often as not, an ordinary man who has made too many excuses, too many refusals and too many postponements. It has all been as imperceptible,

ponements. It has all been as imperceptible, and as pleasant, as falling asleep.

–**Derek Kidner**, *Proverbs* (IVP, 1964), pp. 42–43.

7: Time. Redeemed.

Two or three times each year I retrieve a collection of articles in a folder labeled “Time Management.” Among the articles I review is one titled “Time Well Spent: Right Now Counts Forever,” written by one of my heroes in the faith, Dr. R.C. Sproul.

The article first appeared in *Tabletalk* magazine several years ago (September 1997, pp. 4–7). And if you could see my copy of the article, you would notice that it’s peppered with years of highlights, underlines, and check marks.

I’m thankful Dr. Sproul wrote this article. And today I offer to you the essential substance of the article as we continue our series on biblical productivity.

It’s worth your time.

Time Well Spent

By R.C. Sproul

Time is the great leveler. It is one resource that is allocated in absolute egalitarian terms. Every living person has the same number of hours to use in every day. Busy people are not given a special bonus added on to the hours of the day. The clock plays no favorites.

We all have an equal measure of time in every day. Where we differ from one another is in how we redeem the time allotted. When something is redeemed it is rescued or purchased from some negative condition. The basic negative condition we are concerned with is the condition of waste. To waste time is to spend it on that which has little or no value.

I am a time waster. When I think of the time I have wasted over the course of my life, I am hounded by remorse. This guilt is not a false one fostered by an overactive work ethic. The guilt is real because the time I have wasted is real time.

The late Vince Lombardi introduced the adage, “I never lost a game, I just ran out of time.” This explanation points to one of the most dramatic elements of sports—the race against the clock. The team that is most productive in the allotted time is the team that wins the game. Of course, in sports, unlike life, there are provisions for calling time-out. The clock in a sports contest can be temporarily halted. But in real life there are no timeouts...

Given my propensity to waste time, I have learned a few tricks to help me beat the clock. They may be helpful to some of you.

First, I realize that all of my time is God's time and all of my time is my time by His delegation. God owns me and my time. Yet, He has given me a measure of time over which I am a steward. I can commit that time to work for other people, visit other people, etc. But it is time for which I must give an account.

Second, time can be redeemed by concentration and focus. One of the greatest wastes of time occurs in the human mind. Our hands may be busy but our minds idle. Likewise, our hands may be idle while our minds are busy. Woolgathering, day-dreaming, and indulging in frivolous fantasy are ways in which thoughts may be wasted in real time. To focus our minds on the task at hand—with fierce concentration—makes for productive use of time.

Third, the mind can redeem valuable time taken up by ordinary or mechanical functions. For example, the mechanics of taking a shower are not difficult. In this setting the mind is free for problem solving, creative thinking, or the composition of themes. Many of my messages and lectures are germinated in the shower. When I used to play a lot of golf, I found that the time I had between shots was a great time for composing messages in my mind.

Fourth, use your leisure time for pursuits that are life enriching. Leisure time is often spent on avocations. Reading is a valuable use of time. It enriches life to read outside of your major field or area of expertise. Augustine once advised believers to learn as much as possible about as many things as possible,

since all truth is God's truth. Other avocations that are enriching include the arts. I like to study the piano and I dabble in painting. No one will ever mistake me for a serious musician or an accomplished artist. But these avocations open up the world of beauty to me that enhances my view of God and His manifold perfections. I also enjoy working crossword puzzles to warm up the little gray cells and to expand my vista of verbal expression.

Fifth, find ways to cheat the "Sand Man." Several years ago I had an epiphany about time management. Though my life-long pattern had been to stay up late at night I realized that for me, the hours between 9–12 p.m. were not very productive. I reasoned that if I used those hours to sleep I might secure more time for more productive things. Since then my habit has been to retire between 8–9 p.m. when possible and rise at 4 a.m. This has effected a wonderful revolution for my schedule. The early hours of the day are a time free from distractions and interruptions, a marvelous time for study, writing, and prayer...

Sixth, use drive-time for learning. Driving a car is another mechanical function that allows the mind to be alert to more than what is happening on the roadway. The benefits of audio tape can be put to great use during these times. I can listen to lectures and instructional tapes while driving, thereby redeeming the time.

Finally, in most cases a schedule is more liberating than restricting. Working with a schedule helps enormously to organize our use of time. The schedule should be a friend, not an enemy. I find it freeing in that the schedule can include time for leisure,

recreation, and avocation. It helps us find the rhythm for a God-glorifying productive life.

8: Roles, Goals, Scheduling

Currently Amazon.com lists 90,864 books under the topic of “time management.” Titles range from *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* by David Allen, a helpful book I recommend, to *Time Management for Dummies*, a book I have not read, although it appears I represent the target audience.

“Time management” books are hot and it’s obvious why—we all want to discover some previously unknown secret that will enable us to become more productive. Yet in this series we have discovered that getting more things done does not mean we are getting the right things done.

Or to put this in a little triad: busyness does not mean I am *diligent*; busyness does not mean I am *faithful*; busyness does not mean I am *fruitful*.

In the past several posts in this series, we looked at procrastination: putting off until the last moment tasks that are important (and presumably most difficult), and instead devoting ourselves to what is easy and urgent, but not as important.

My busyness may be procrastination in disguise.

But today we transition in this series from discussing the hindrances to biblical productivity (procrastination, laziness, and the tendencies of the sluggard) to looking at how we can effectively plan and prioritize.

From my study of this topic and my observation of those I admire (and desire to emulate), it appears

to me that being faithful, productive, and fruitful for the glory of God requires that I accomplish three things:

1. define my present God-given **roles**,
2. determine specific, theologically informed **goals**, and
3. transfer these goals into my **schedule**.

Over the next several posts we will develop these three in some detail.

But you may be thinking to yourself, why go through the trouble of determining these roles, creating goals, and fitting all this into my schedule? Why not take life as it comes?

Perhaps you dislike—or even despise—all things related to planning. Perhaps you, like me, can identify with my friend Michael McKinley when he recently wrote: “I would rather stick a fork in my eye than sit in a planning meeting.” Mike has painfully and creatively captured my tendency to postpone planning, and if possible, avoid planning altogether. But while I think of myself as an all-about-the-moment guy, my avoidance of planning is to the detriment of my schedule and (more importantly) to the detriment of my service to my family and church.

Here’s why.

The problem for those of us with this fork-in-the-eye approach to planning is that during each day the most urgent requests will compete with and distract from the most important goals and priorities of our lives. Each day the number of requests we receive normally outnumber the time allotted for the day.

My experience confirms that if I fail to attack my week with theologically informed planning, my week attacks me with an onslaught of the urgent. And I end up devoting more time to the urgent than the important.

And at the end of the week there is a low-grade guilt and dissatisfaction in my soul, because I've neglected to do the truly important stuff. I want to have as few weeks like this as possible in whatever time remains for me to serve the Savior. I'm thinking you do as well.

9: Roles (Part 1)

It's not hard for us to imagine that pastors and church planters are *called* by God. This is clear to us throughout Scripture. So when we come across the first verse in Romans, where Paul says he was "*called* to be an apostle," we have no problem with this.

But what about the rest of us?

What about a stay-at-home mom with two kids? What about an auto mechanic? How about a real estate agent and a business owner? Has God called them?

What about you? Are you aware of being called by God to a particular task?

Theology of Work

Disagreements over a "theology of work" are common throughout church history. In fact (I was just told) the Middle Ages was marked by a stiff distinction between sacred and secular work. Pastors and church leaders were considered called; laborers were not so called. One is sacred; one is secular.

Then along came a Reformation.

Not only did the Reformers make a giant stride by viewing "secular" work as a calling from God, they took a second step and broadened this calling to include not only work but also vocation.

Leland Ryken writes in his book *Redeeming the Time* (Baker, 1995), "The early Protestants rightly conceived of our callings as being much broader than

our job. All of our roles in life are callings. Being a spouse, a parent, a church member, a neighbor, and a Christian are all callings” (p. 151).

By this, the Reformers introduced an understanding of God’s sovereignty that included all of life—every vocation, every detail, every moment.

Today it appears that many Christians aren’t clear on their work as calling. Christians are normally clear that we should live out the Christian ethic in the workplace. But the Reformers were calling for something bigger.

Ryken writes:

Most Christians believe they can be a Christian at work. To do so involves being a diligent worker, being honest in one’s dealings with an employer, and witnessing to fellow workers. But this still leaves the work itself untouched by one’s Christian faith. The original Protestants were right in going beyond this and claiming that the work itself is a spiritual issue and a means of glorifying God. We can be Christian not only in our work but through our work if we view our work as an obedient response to God’s calling. (p. 148)

This perspective will transform your attitude as you proceed to work, wait in traffic, and arrive to work for yet another day!

Determining Roles

But how can I be certain of my own calling? How can I know I am in the right job? Am I in the proper

career path? What about where God wants me in the future? How do I determine God's intended vocation(s) for my life?

In his book *The Spirituality of the Cross* (Concordia, 1999), Gene Veith provides two insightful questions.

First, where has God placed me?

How do we know our vocation? Strictly speaking—and contrary to the way we pressure young people to “decide” what they are going to do when they grow up—a vocation is not something we choose for ourselves. Rather, it is given by God, who “calls” us to a particular work or station. God gives each individual unique talents, skills, and inclinations. He also puts each individual in a unique set of external circumstances, which are understood as having been providentially arranged by God. Since vocation is not self-chosen, it can be known too through the actions of others. Getting offered a job, being elected to an office, finding someone who wants to marry you, are all clues to vocation...

Perhaps later, another vocation will present itself. But vocation is to be found not simply in future career decisions, but in the here and now. Nor can a person use the excuse of “not having a vocation for marriage” for getting a divorce, or claim “not having a vocation for parenthood” as a way to dump childrearing responsibilities. If you are married, that's your vocation. If you have children, they are your vocation. (p. 80)

Second, where am I positioned to serve others?

The purpose of one's vocation, whatever it might be, is serving others. It has to do with fulfilling Christ's injunction to love one's neighbor...Our relationship to God is not determined by our good works (since those with a sinful nature can never have enough of them to earn anything before God)—what we need rather, is forgiveness for our sins and the perfect good works of Jesus Christ. But our relationship to our neighbors is determined by our good works, which themselves are only made possible by God working through us. (pp. 77, 78)

Essentially, your vocation is to be found in the place you occupy in the present. A person stuck in a dead-end job may have higher ambitions, but for the moment, that job, however humble, is his vocation. Flipping hamburgers, cleaning hotel rooms, emptying bedpans all have dignity as vocations, spheres of expressing love of neighbor through selfless service, in which God is masked. (p. 80)

It may be that our vocation is not clear because we have not started with these two questions.

- Where has God placed me?
- Where am I positioned to serve others?

Take a moment to look down at your feet. Go ahead, look. For most of us, our feet are currently resting

within the geographic circle of God's calling on our lives. In the future God may call you outside that circle. But that is for another time.

I fear too many Christians are so distracted by thoughts of the future that they cannot discern with clarity how God has called them to serve in their present vocations. Though they show up for work each day, they don't work with passion and joy each day.

Conclusion

As you ask yourself these questions, pray that God will help his specific call on your life become clear. Look down, and write down what you discover.

Keep the list handy, because next time we will look at that list and get into the specifics.

10: Roles (Part 2)

Not long ago I was awake in the middle of the night, reading, and enjoying the silence.

Except I kept hearing a sound.

Tap... Tap... Tap.

It sounded like dripping water. But from where?

A short search led me to our main-level bathroom, where the dripping noise was the loudest. Crouching down, I opened the cabinet doors under the sink and discovered a little puddle of water in the cabinet.

The problem was easy to see: The drip was coming from the shut-off valve connecting the main water pipe to the faucet pipe.

A small drip.

A small puddle.

A small problem.

I had two choices: seek help from someone who understands plumbing, or take matters into my own hands and fix the drip myself.

I chose the less wise option.

Equipped with no plumbing knowledge whatsoever, I assumed that turning the shut-off valve would tighten the connection and stop the leak. But as I tried to tighten the valve, it came loose. Powered by the water pressure behind it, the valve was fired past me like a bullet.

Immediately an unstoppable spray drenched my clothes, sprayed through the makeshift stopper of my hand that was clenching the pipe, soaked the bathroom floor, and began to flood the hallway.

The dark, quiet, sleepy household was filled with the loud shouts of a helpless, waterlogged man.

With some help we shut off the water pressure, cleaned up the mess, laughed a lot, and went back to bed. Someone with actual plumbing expertise fixed the problem the next day.

My point is obvious: I am not a plumber. And although sometimes I think I can excel beyond my limited gifting, I cannot. Now that the bathroom has been restored to proper working order, I find great liberation in yet another reminder that I am not called to do everything.

Gene Veith writes, “In our earthly lives, we do not have to do everything. Earthly life—and this is operative with non-believers no less than believers—consists of giving and receiving, serving and being served, in a network of economic and social and personal interdependence” (*The Spirituality of the Cross*, p. 76).

Which is to say that God calls us to fulfill specific roles.

What Are My Roles?

It is liberating to know that God has called me to fulfill specific roles. And knowing this can protect me from doing stupid things. But how do I know what God has called me to do?

In the last post we talked about two very helpful questions:

- Where has God placed me?
- Where am I positioned to serve others?

If this all seems illusive to you, it may help to see a list of roles (or vocations). This is hardly a comprehensive list, but in this list perhaps you will better identify specific roles where God has placed you.

- Christian
- Single man
- Single woman
- Husband
- Wife
- Father
- Mother
- Child
- Grandfather
- Grandmother
- Church member
- Pastor
- Ministry leader
- Church planter
- Employee
- Business owner
- Student
- Educator
- Chef
- 24-hour emergency plumber

Wonderfully, none of these roles falls outside the scope of God's calling. By his sovereign grace, he has placed each of us where we presently are. And once we identify these God-given roles, we can begin to think about creating specific goals.

And I think it's important to note that our specific roles will change over time, so we need to revisit the list (maybe even annually).

My Roles

So here is where my planning for a particular week begins, not with the schedule, but with considering my God-given roles. If I'm not fulfilling my roles, my goals will be misdirected, and I will be vulnerable to all manner of requests and fail to devote myself to what is most important.

These are the roles assigned to me by the grace of God. I am a...

1. Christian
2. Husband
3. Father
4. Grandfather
5. Ministry leader

So how has God called you? Take a moment to list God's callings on your life. Create your own personal list of roles. Writing this list out will increase your awareness of your God-given roles, which will help you prioritize and plan.

As I hope you will discover for yourself in this series, our **biblical productivity** depends a **schedule**, which depends upon **clear goals**, which depends upon **clearly defined roles**. Working toward clarity on understanding my present roles is my first (and most important) step in developing biblical productivity.

Defining our roles helps to ensure that we are doing stuff that matters each day, knowing we have in some small way advanced the gospel and served others.

It is sweet falling asleep knowing we have redeemed the time.

11: Goals (Part 1)

For several weeks on this blog we have been considering the topic of biblical productivity. We started by understanding how Scripture defines procrastination. Then we transitioned to a discussion about roles, goals, and scheduling. In the previous two posts we talked about roles. Today we begin looking at the topic of goals.

With each of our God-assigned roles, God assigns us specific goals. Open your Bible and begin reading and within a few pages you will discover the genesis of this role-goal connection.

Genesis 1-2

In those first few pages, we read that God reached down and formed Adam out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils, and that lifeless form came to life. Adam—the first man—was “born.”

In the creation account, God wasted little time in assigning Adam specific roles and goals: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28).

If we fast-forward into the next chapter, we zoom into a specific situation: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it

and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). For simplicity, I’ll give Adam the title of “Chief Gardener.”

Adam was to “work” and “keep” the garden. We can imagine the Chief Gardener walking peacefully through the lush paradise, making certain everything was properly cultivated and protected. Not a bad gig in the pre-thorn era.

If we look in on Adam’s role in the garden, his profile may look something like this:

Role: Chief Gardener

Goal: To subdue the earth (specifically in the garden).

Schedule: We don’t know what Adam’s daily routine looked like—he didn’t have a day planner—but we can assume it was filled with specific duties of “working,” or serving, and “keeping,” or protecting, the garden.

We can only speculate about the specific duties Adam was assigned in the garden. What’s important is that we see that from the very beginning, before sin entered the garden, there seems to be a connection between Adam’s **roles** and his **goals**. Those goals, in turn, would have directed his daily activities—which we’re calling his **schedule**.

Twentieth-century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, as he reflected on Adam’s position in the garden, captures the priority of goals (in relation to roles) when he writes:

Work cannot have its end and final purpose in itself but always has as its further objective to bring

something into being. It ceases when that objective has been reached. To work, simply to work, without deliberation, plan, or purpose, is to work hopelessly and is unworthy of rational man.¹

God assigns specific roles for the purpose of achieving specific goals. It may seem obvious, but if we are not clear on this role-goal connection, we are likely to fill our schedules—or find our schedules filled—by everything but the truly important.

God has called me to my specific role because he intends that I achieve a specific goal. I do this through specific tasks, reflected in my schedule.

A second example will help us more fully develop a biblical picture of goals.

Acts 6

Acts describes the spread of the gospel and the growth of the first-century church. Churches were planted, leadership structures were formed, and communities of believers were established. With the increasing numbers added to the church came increasing personal and practical needs.

In Acts 6 we read about one specific challenge faced by the Apostles, requiring them to revisit their roles and goals:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows

¹ *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1956), p. 216.

were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” (vv. 1–4)

Notice the looming mercy ministry challenge faced by the growing church: How do we feed all the hungry widows? Obviously, the hungry widows posed a critical—and very legitimate—need that required a timely response from the church leaders.

But the food would not come from the hands of the Apostles.

Notice the profiles that emerge in this passage of the two separate groups:

Role: Apostle

Goal: Proclaim the gospel, plant and build churches

Schedule: Pray, prepare sermons, preach, and build

Role: Servant-leader

Goal: Preserve the goals of the Apostles by feeding the widows

Schedule: Daily coordination of food distribution

The roles-goals principle was alive and at work in first-century Jerusalem. The Apostles were called by

God for the specific goal of preaching the Word and prayer. They were *not* called to serve food to the widows. To do so would have moved them outside their specific roles and goals.

Simultaneously, seven servant-leaders in the church were identified and positioned to serve the needs of the hungry widows.

We can imagine the compassionate impulse in the heart of the Apostles to take up the needs of the widows as their own personal goal. But that would be inconsistent with their roles.

Conclusion

Both of these Scriptural accounts, one describing Adam's pre-sin vocation and the other describing first-century church leadership, remind us that roles have purpose. Our specific roles are reminders—divine Post-It notes—that God has called us to fulfill specific goals. So throughout each day I should ask myself, “Is what I’m doing consistent with my God-ordained goals?”

Awareness of the roles God has assigned positions us to pursue our goals and to fill a day planner that reflects genuine diligence, faithfulness, and fruitfulness. All to God's glory.

So how can I identify the specific goals that flow out of my specific roles? That's for next time.

12: Goals (Part 2)

Have you ever looked at an empty calendar and asked yourself, “What am I supposed to be doing right now?” Have you looked at a calendar filled to the brim with 25 hours of things to do each day and asked yourself, “What am I supposed to be doing right now?”

By themselves, neither empty schedules nor suffocating schedules help clarify our daily priorities. But identifying our God-ordained roles will. And if you are following along in this blog series, you have hopefully by now developed your own list of God-ordained roles.

More on this in a minute.

Judging from the emails you have sent in, there are at least a few of you who want to make the jump from roles to scheduling. Please don’t jump until you hear me out. Because until we fill in the middle, that often-fuzzy area that connects our roles to our schedules, our calendars will lack purpose and specificity.

So please hang on for one more post before we jump into scheduling.

My Roles

Earlier in this series I listed the five primary roles I currently fill:

1. Christian

2. Husband
3. Father
4. Grandfather
5. Ministry leader

This looks like a simple and obvious list—and it is—but it does require a little focused time thinking through and prioritizing these roles. The order is important. So I hope you have invested a few moments to define God's roles for your life and have the list in front of you.

Please write this list out. We are constantly tempted to read about things we may wholeheartedly agree with (like biblical productivity), yet fail to respond with anything more than a head nodding in agreement. So please take time to list these roles on paper.

The 15 minutes you devote to clarifying your roles will quickly repay itself in hours of time-saving clarity and purpose as you determine your goals and finalize your schedule.

My Goals

Okay, now onto my goals. For me, I work from two general categories that work well with most of my roles (especially my relationships with other people). Broadly speaking, my goals are twofold:

- **Serve** (How can I serve others?)
- **Surprise** (How can I surprise others?)

Obviously, I don't think these are the only categories you may work from, but thinking in terms of **servicing** and **surprising** has helped clarify my goals and scheduling week after week over the years.

Serve and What?

I think most of us understand the priority Scripture places on serving the needs of others. I don't think I need to convince you of its importance.

But what about surprising others? What's up with that?

Granted, surprising others is not always distinct from serving them. But while we often think of serving as limited to meeting obvious needs, there is more to it than that. Paul writes, "Outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:10). The intentionality and the intensity of this statement are hard to miss. God commands a holy competition in showing honor to others.

So do our schedules reflect obedience to this command?

Convicting, isn't it?

As you can see, I find it helpful to think of these goals—serving and surprising—as separate categories. Roughly speaking, to serve is to effectively provide for legitimate needs. To surprise is to happily and generously honor and bless others!

Both categories should be the effect of the gospel in our hearts and the appropriate expression of love for others. And both categories honor God, and both categories should find their way into our schedules.

Limiting Goals

Now please don't be running off and setting hundreds of goals in relation to each role! I have too often set too many goals that went unfulfilled and left me discouraged. I recommend just a few goals for any single role. I create no more than three goals per role in a given week.

While we could no doubt develop a long list of goals under each role, our time, energy, and gifts are restricted. Four or more goals are likely more than many of us can handle, and especially if you can identify more than three personal roles.

Please don't misunderstand. My approach is merely a recommendation for your consideration. There is no need to follow my approach. But you do need to custom-design some approach that incorporates roles and goals into your schedule.

That's for next time.

13: Goals (Part 3)

This series is becoming increasingly practice oriented. As it does, I think it is important to note that my approach is merely a recommendation, one recommendation among so many available today.

It's not important that you emulate my approach, but you do need some theologically informed approach to time management, a custom-designed approach that incorporates your particular roles and goals into your weekly or monthly schedule.

So let me explain how the specific goals work in relation to each of my five specific roles.

My Goals as a Christian

If you are a Christian, you have personally experienced God's saving act of love. And no other role is more crucial or central than that of "Christian."

Yet I suspect the role of "Christian" is also the one we're most likely to assume when we write our schedules. But the relationship with God we've been given as a result of the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ for our sin should be our highest priority.

I find it useful to identify two specific goals. As a Christian, my goals are:

- **Communion** with God.
- **Participation** in the local church.

Communion with God. It's possible to view our practice of the spiritual disciplines (study of Scripture, prayer, etc.) as optional additions to our routine when time allows, rather than goals derived from our primary role (Christians). Our communion with God can often remain a vague "should do" in our minds that—if we're honest with ourselves—often takes less of a priority in our schedules than that important Wednesday lunch meeting with a colleague.

The consequence of neglecting a personal goal is nowhere more serious than when we neglect God and neglect our own souls. Scripture sternly cautions us to enforce all diligence over our hearts: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23). We must study our hearts. We must monitor the condition of our hearts. We must work by the grace of God to employ the spiritual disciplines to keep our hearts with all vigilance.

And ultimately we must look outward and upward, surveying the wondrous cross and the Savior who died there for us. The Father's wrath against all our sins has been satisfied. We must never lose sight of Calvary. And the spiritual disciplines help us daily focus our gaze on the Savior.

So we should be careful that this primary role is reflected in our schedules.

In carving out 45–60 minutes of time in the morning, I am seeking to:

- Acknowledge my dependence upon God, affirm my intention to trust in him, and voice skepticism of my own understanding (Proverbs 3:5–6).

- Slowly enter the day, careful to begin with a divine perspective.
- Preach the gospel to myself.
- Get my soul happy before God by meditating on Scripture (a practice I learned from the writings of George Mueller).

Participation in the local church. As those who have been forever changed by the gospel, we have the privilege and joy of serving in the local church.

When we consider how to apply this goal to our schedules, we can ask ourselves three simple questions.

Ask yourself:

- When and how am I intentionally serving those around me? this year? this week?
- When and how do I care specifically for those closest to me in the church? this year? this week? (For some of you, this will consist of serving those in your small group.)
- When and how do I pray for and support my pastor? this year? this week?

These are questions that flow directly from my goal.

In the coming posts I'll focus on my personal goals derived from my roles as husband, father, grandfather, and ministry leader.

14: Goals (Part 4)

In the previous post in this series, I explained the personal goals that flow from my most important relationship: my relationship with God. Because that relationship is a priority, my goal is to practice the spiritual disciplines as a way of communing with God and acknowledging my dependence upon him. This goal shows up in my schedule as I protect my morning devotional time.

Today we begin to explore biblical productivity in my relationships with others, particularly in my roles as husband, father, and grandfather.

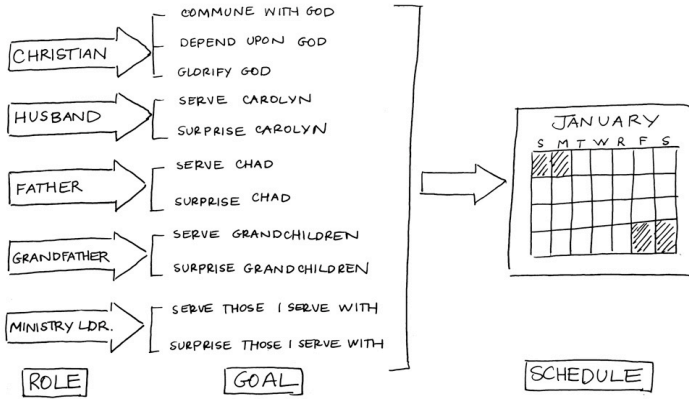
Serve and Surprise

As I explained earlier, in my relationships with others I work from two biblical categories. Broadly speaking, my goals are twofold:

- **Serve** (How can I serve?)
- **Surprise** (How can I surprise?)

Obviously, I don't think these are the only categories you may work from, but thinking in terms of **servicing** and **surprising** has helped clarify my goals and scheduling week after week over the years.

Connect my roles to my goals and you begin to see the basic framework that informs my schedule. If I were to draw this out, it might look something like this:



Studying

I can hear you asking, *But C.J., how do I serve and surprise my wife? How do I serve and surprise my son? What exactly am I to do? Give me specifics.*

Actually, at this point the most effective way I can serve you is to not give you specifics on how I serve and surprise my wife, son, and grandchildren. Here’s why: Those you are called to serve and surprise are unique. This means the specific ways you serve and surprise your wife may look very different from the ways I serve and surprise my wife.

Study Your Wife

For example, let’s look at my role as husband to Carolyn. As I plan how to serve and surprise my wife, I think about a number of categories. Here are my two lists. You can probably add to them.

Do you know how to surprise and delight your wife in specific ways in each of these areas?

- clothing sizes, styles, and stores
- jewelry
- health
- exercise
- books and magazines
- movies
- the arts
- sports
- food
- music
- entertainment
- places to visit
- intellectual interests
- hobbies
- vacations/getaways
- and, of course, sex

Do you know how your wife is faring in each of these areas?

- theological knowledge
- practice of the spiritual disciplines
- growth in godliness
- spiritual gifts that can be used to serve others
- involvement in the local church
- relationships with children
- relationships with parents
- relationships with in-laws
- relationships with friends
- personal retreats

- fears
- hopes
- dreams
- disappointments
- temptation

Once I have considered these categories, I can put specific ways to serve and surprise my wife on my weekly and monthly schedule.

Conclusion

It's relatively easy to consider our roles and create goals. The greater challenge is to deliver on our good intentions by transferring those goals to our schedules.

Serving and surprising others requires that we study them carefully, learn their particular needs and interests, and take action based on what we learn. And when we do, our wives and children, and all those we serve, will freshly experience our affection, care, and service.

15: Scheduling the Unexpected

At the beginning of the biblical productivity series, I stated that busyness is no sign of diligence, faithfulness, or fruitfulness. And that is because busyness does not indicate that we are devoting ourselves to the most important things. We can become busy with everything under the sun except fulfilling the roles God has assigned for us. And no matter how busy I appear, if I am neglecting one of my primary roles, I am a procrastinator, spinning in unproductive circles.

To this point in the series we have focused on how to identify roles, create goals, and block out our schedule to make sure our time is focused on what is most important.

My preference is to retreat to Starbucks on Monday morning (a day off for me). That's when two very important things take place: (1) I carefully study the *Washington Post* sports page. (2) I consider my roles, create goals, and transfer them into my schedule for the coming week.

But no matter how hard we try, it is impossible to plan every detail of our week. Interruptions arise, an unanticipated phone call requires an immediate decision and possible time investment, a new email from a friend requests our help, and a new counseling situation arises that will require the pastor's immediate attention. The list of possible surprises in our carefully planned weeks is seemingly endless.

So what do we do with the requests we didn't see coming?

First, it is important to understand our roles, goals, and schedules before we discuss responding to unanticipated requests. Often the procrastinator fails to work from biblical roles to establish his schedule, and is therefore vulnerable to the urgent. So he defaults to the most recent—or easiest—request. He neglects the important tasks and is governed by the urgent and the easy. He is busy, busy, busy, but he is not diligent, faithful, or fruitful.

On the other hand, the one who has been diligent, understands his roles, and has created goals can respond to unanticipated requests with discernment, aware of the time he has available. He can make appropriate scheduling decisions. He has planned for the upcoming week, informed by biblical roles, and can now evaluate requests and everyday surprises wisely.

Each day, both requests and opportunities to serve exceed our capacity and our time. Saying “no” is really a humble response acknowledging our limitations. But if we have not determined in advance who we are to serve, and how we are to serve, we will not be able to say “no” when appropriate.

If you cannot say “no,” you will be governed by the urgent requests of others and distracted from what is most important. Eventually you will become overextended and frustrated.

Evaluating Requests

So how do we evaluate the many requests and opportunities we encounter each day? This is not science, but I personally work from a rough framework when evaluating requests as they arrive. I

evaluating requests as they arrive. I approach the requests through a workflow that can be divided into three primary questions.

(1) Does the request fit my roles?

First, does this particular request reflect my God-ordained roles? Does it reflect my role as a Christian, or my roles as a husband, father, grandfather, ministry leader, or my commitment to the local church? If so, it automatically moves on to the second question that we will get to in one minute.

But if the request is not consistent with my roles, I ask a further question: Can I complete this in less than two minutes? Sometimes small opportunities to bless others arise but do not fit into our specific roles. If that's the case, go for it." If not—if this is a large request that would require a block of time in my schedule and does not fit into my roles—I must decide to delegate, decline, or delete the request (basic David Allen stuff).

(2) Does the request fit my goals?

So the request is consistent with your roles. Good. And in previous posts we have begun considering our goals, which are really sub-priorities within each role.

So does the specific request meet my personal goals? Perhaps not. Or at least not at this time. These requests must go into a folder where they can be prayed about, submitted to the counsel of others, and possibly postponed for later consideration.

If the request is consistent with my roles and goals, then it needs to be done. Time to proceed to the third question.

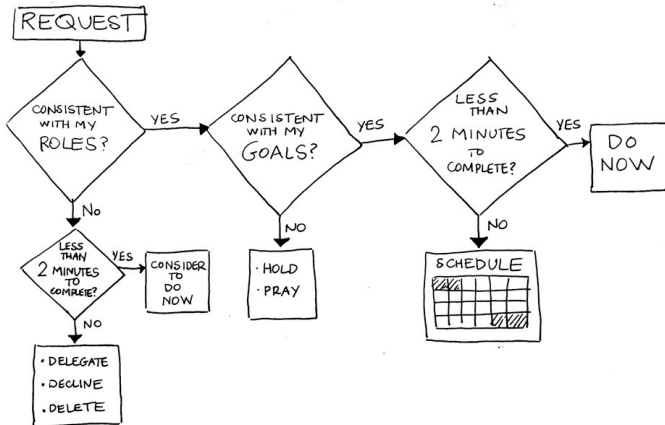
(3) Can I accomplish the request in under two minutes?

This is a simple question that can help as you put requests on your schedule.

Can the request be accomplished in two minutes or less? If you can complete the request that quickly then it's really a no-brainer—complete it immediately. There is no reason to wait, no need to schedule a block of time.

But if the request requires more than two minutes of your time, it will require a place in the schedule.

So that is my process for evaluating requests. If we put this entire process together, it may look something like this flow chart:



Conclusion

It's not possible to schedule all of our lives (nor should we try). And so there is no misunderstanding: I'm not dependent upon my schedule. My dependence rests upon God himself.

The unexpected will arise each day, needs will emerge that we did not anticipate, and situations that we could not foresee will require our attention.

We should not be surprised by apparent interruptions to our schedule. These are part of God's purpose and plan for our lives. As C.S. Lewis so wisely noted:

The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's "own," or "real" life. The truth is of course that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life—the life God is sending one day by day; what one calls one's "real life" is a phantom of one's own imagination. This at least is what I see at moments of insight: but it's hard to remember it all the time.

So true.

16: Self-Sufficient

As the typical day unfolds, the unexpected expectedly happens. With one eye on the clock and another on our schedule, we can often watch our planning derail throughout the day. And as I realize my plans for the day will not be flawlessly executed, my soul has a tendency to be weighed down by accumulating cares. But rather than humbling myself as I should, I find myself vulnerable to self-sufficiency, at risk of relying upon my limited strength and wisdom. This is pride.

If we are not watchful, our burdens will subtly accumulate over time, and will gradually weigh down our soul. But it doesn't need to be this way. There is a biblical alternative.

Casting Pride and Casting Cares

Scripture calls us to cast all our anxieties on God, because he cares for us.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, **casting all your anxieties on him**, because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:6–7)

Casting all my cares upon the Lord is a means of humbling myself before the Lord. In reading these passages we discover that casting our cares upon the Lord falls under the command to humble ourselves.

Casting our cares is an expression of humility. When I fail to cast my cares upon him, I display prideful self-sufficiency.

A Few Words of Prayer

As I make my way from meeting to meeting, decision to decision, and phone call to phone call, I find the counsel of Charles Spurgeon very helpful. “I always feel it well,” he wrote, “to put a few words of prayer between everything I do.” Throughout his busy days, Spurgeon scattered words of prayer between each activity, a model I have sought to emulate over the years.

The content of my “few words of prayer” is not unique and if you overheard them, you wouldn’t be impressed. I am a simple man and when I think of casting all my cares it is a simple acknowledgement of my dependence upon God and my need of grace throughout the day.

But the very act of pausing in a busy day to pray is an act of weakening pride in my life, acknowledging that I am a dependent creature. I am not self-sufficient.

And taking a brief moment to humble myself in prayer makes all the difference in my soul throughout the day.

At its root, weariness is often the result of pride and self-sufficiency in my life. When I neglect casting my cares upon the Lord, the heavy fatigue of weariness will settle into my soul.

Casting our cares upon the Lord and humbling ourselves before him are critical activities, regardless

of how busy we are. And this practice cannot be replaced by hours of careful planning and scheduling.

How about you? Do you follow the practice of Spurgeon and “put a few words of prayer” between everything you do throughout each day? Are you casting cares or accumulating burdens? Are you humbling yourself before the Lord or displaying self-sufficiency?

17: The To-Do Lists Are Never Done

Only God gets his to-do list done each day.

This simple sentence informs how I begin my day, what I expect to accomplish during the day, and how I close each day.

When I step out of my office and turn the light off at the end of my day, and the list of to-dos is incomplete, I say to my secretary, “Nora, we will try again tomorrow.” This brief statement is an acknowledgment of my limitations, and is my way of saying that—once again—I didn’t get everything done. It’s a moment for me to cultivate humility.

No matter how much planning, scheduling, and discipline is present in my life, I will never completely redeem the time. I am a finite creature, limited in what I can accomplish, and further limited by my sin. So it should surprise nobody that I leave to-dos undone each and every day.

My joy is not derived from the flawless execution of my goals. My joy each day is derived from the person and work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Only God gets his to-do list done each day. I need the cross of Christ each day.



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