

A Christian View of Busyness

Matthew 6:25-34

There are 168 hours in a week and 8736 hours in a year. We all get the same number of hours whether we are young or old, rich or poor, busy or bored. The difference is not in how much time any of us has; the difference is in what we do with our time.

In 21st century America the average woman works a total of 51 hours a week on her job and with housework. The average man works a total of 53 hours a week on his job and with housework. It's true that men work two more hours per week than women, but women do 70% more housework than men. We work as many if not more hours than the people of any other industrialized nation of the world.

Our work hours are increasing. Many of us have two or three jobs. In most families both parents work. Thirty-six percent of American executives say they spend more time on the job now than they did five years ago.

Busyness shows up almost everywhere. We sleep less (an average of 9 hours per night in 1850; 8 hours per night in 1950; less than 7 hours per night by 2000). We are overloaded with news, work, competition, computers, cell phones, e-mail, faxes, traffic commutes and other stuff. We are over committed, over worked, over weight, over tired and over busy.

One of the major consequences is stress. A primary cause of stress is trying to do more than we have the capacity to do. We try to do more and more in less and less time. Stress leads to fatigue, depression, anger, workaholism and physical illness.

Busyness leads to hurriedness. To get more done in less time we rush and multitask. One humorist says that only in America would we have a national monument called "Mount Rush-more".

Busyness and hurriedness become a way of life that is hard to shut off even when it is not needed. Watch people fight to get ahead of others in line to board a plane. Do they think they will get there sooner than the others? Everyone arrives at the same time!

When approaching an intersection with a red light I automatically count the trucks in each lane. I choose the lane with fewer big trucks because I figure that's the way for a faster start when the light changes to green.

At the grocery store we all make a mental calculation of the contents of each cart in each line. We don't want to get behind someone with a large order. And, we can become angry and hostile with a customer whose cart has 10 items in the 8 item express lane.

Fast food restaurants have littered our landscape. We don't have time to go inside, sit down, order from the menu and wait for the food to be cooked and served. We want it ready and waiting for us before we get there. But, fast food wasn't fast enough because it took time to park the car and walk inside. Along came the drive-up window to save a few more precious minutes.

We have so many commitments and have made so many promises that we often don't have time to enjoy the simple things in life. That was the point of America's Poet Laureate, Robert Frost, in his famous poem "Stopping By The Woods On A Snowy Evening".

Busyness is not necessarily a bad thing. Most of us would rather be busy than bored. And the Bible is very clear about what is wrong with laziness. St. Paul once lived in the Greek city of Thessalonica. After he left he wrote a letter back to the Christians there about his experience. We read in 2 Thessalonians 3:8-13:

. . . we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

Busyness can steal some of the best things out of our lives and fill the space with less-than-the-best.

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.

Paul was a busy man, busy with work and supporting himself. He had zero tolerance for people who are lazy and wouldn't work. He went so far as to say, "Don't even give them food. Let the lazy person go hungry until he is ready to work." And, he distinguishes between "good busy" (working for a living) and "bad busy" (messing in the business of others).

The problem with busyness is that it risks playing God. We become so busy that we act as if we have control over everything that's going on in our lives and we don't really need God. We seem to think we can do everything and do not truly trust God for the good in our lives. This is the point in the Old Testament rule of the Sabbath in Deuteronomy 5:12-15:

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or your daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has and commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

The Sabbath wasn't just one day off every week. It was also one year off every seven years. Imagine the ancient Hebrew farmer saying, "There's no way I can get everything done in six days. I have fields to plow, seed to sow, harvest to bring in. I can barely get it done in all the hours I'm working now. If I took a day off, I would never get done. And, it would be economic suicide to let my farm lie fallow every seventh year." But God was saying, "Trust me! Leave space for me to do a miracle." In other words, trust God that he will supernaturally help you get

done what needs to get done without always being busy.

In our culture we sometimes talk about our busy schedule as a way of communicating that we are really important. People say, "Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule." It is meant as a compliment that this person is really important. And because our society often equates busyness with importance we seek to become busy and stay busy as an ego trip. The idea is that the person with the most appointments, most clients, most patients and most frequent flyer miles is more important than the person who has some free time. So busyness can become an expression of pride. And pride is a dangerous and sometimes deadly sin.

Busyness fills life so full that there is no time to do what may be more important. We don't have time to think or pray or love or talk to God or serve others. Busyness can steal some of the best things out of our lives and fill the space with less-than-the-best.

For too many of us, busyness can disguise major personal problems. When we have no friends and cannot bear the pain of loneliness busyness is a socially accepted way to avoid the problem. If we are paralyzed by fear of failure we stay busy because it looks successful. Even depression can be disguised by busyness as we try to fill every moment to lessen the pain.

Busyness can become an addiction. That's why very busy people are sometimes called workaholics. It is like a narcotic that dulls life's pain, suppresses anxieties, brings on a buzz of self-importance and postpones facing the hard issues of life. It makes us look good and feel good to cover up what is going on inside. Like any addiction, we need more and more to sustain our mood. So, we add more commitments and more appointments until we eventually overdose and burn out.

Busyness may be a symptom of moral laziness. That's what the Desert Fathers of early Christianity said. They were a group of monks and hermits who lived at a time of reaction against the culture around them. They withdrew to the deserts of North Africa and the Sinai Peninsula. There they sought to be alone with God and to reject the busyness and priorities of the pagan culture in which they lived. While they did have some significant dysfunctions of their own, they also had an interesting insight.

They said that busy people often are too lazy to figure out and do what is right. So, rather than making the hard choices and doing the right things we take the lazy way and let life fill up with everything and anything that comes our way.

Micah 6:8 answers the question of what God wants from us in our lives . . . and the answer is not busyness. “(God) has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” In other words, do what is right. And we need time to do what is right.

Jesus set an example of another alternative. His life was full but not full of busyness. He went many places, interacted with many people and did great good. He had a clear sense of time and purpose. There was urgency to Jesus’ message and ministry but he often told his followers it wasn’t yet time to do what they wanted done. Perhaps most impressive about Jesus was the way he maintained boundaries.

He was absolutely sensitive and responsive to what God the Father wanted him to do but he was not controlled by the pressures to comply with all the demands that others laid on him.

Perhaps you remember the story of Jesus miraculously feeding a crowd of 5000 men. In that culture only men were counted so with women and children the crowd would probably have been between 10,000 and 15,000 people. They were so anxious to hear what Jesus had to say and be healed by his touch that they followed him into rural areas where no food was available. They got hungry, so Jesus performed a miracle. He fed 10,000 to 15,000 people with one kid’s sack lunch.

That was an historic and memorable day. Now they were ready to listen and Jesus was teaching them the truths of God. But do you know what Jesus did? According to Mark 6:45, “Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.”

Jesus considered time alone with God to be more important than teaching 15,000 people about God. It isn’t that he neglected them, but he would

not let people consume his time so that he missed out on prayer time and alone time with God.

Another time Jesus was surrounded by a large crowd who came to him for healing and for answers to difficult questions. Jesus healed them and was answering questions about divorce and remarriage. Someone then brought young children for Jesus to bless. Certainly he was too busy for children when dealing with serious illness and questions about divorce and remarriage. But in Matthew 19:13-15 we read:

Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” When he had placed his hands on them, he

went on from there.

Jesus left enough margins in his life to be spontaneous and loving.

All right, so what are we to do? We need a prescription for balance.

First in that prescription is to slow down. John Ortberg has written a book titled *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*. In chapter 5 he tells about his own life in Chicago getting way too busy and phoning a wise mentor for counsel. His friend told him, “You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.” Ortberg says he wrote down the advice and then asked what else he should do. His mentor told him, “There is nothing else.”

Slow down. Drive in the slow lane once in a while. Turn off the radio in the car and the TV at home. Go to bed early. Listen rather than talk. Eat at home instead of going out. Arrive early for a meeting instead of late all the time. Chew your food three more times. Cancel a few subscriptions. Take another day off.

Prescription #2 is to build margin into life. Richard Swenson is a Wisconsin physician who realized his life was far too busy. He ruthlessly created margin in his life that resulted in his writing a book

Always leave extra time even if it means excluding activities you now consider are important.

called MARGIN: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives.

His concept is simple, biblical and profound. We must leave some margins in every area of our lives. Don't spend more than you make—leave a margin of extra money. Don't push yourself to your physical limit—leave a margin for the extra work or sleepless night that cannot be anticipated. And don't schedule 24 hours of every day and 168 of every week. Always leave extra time even if it means excluding activities you now consider are important.

Dr. Swenson significantly altered his medical practice after years of overwork and busyness. He says he would never ever go back to the way life used to be.

Ruthlessly create space for the unexpected and unanticipated. That's hard for me to do. I'm not particularly wired that way. It's hard for me to say "no", so I have to work at that. For me this has become a personal challenge and priority. At the beginning of each year I enter every family birthday and holiday to protect them from anything that will crowd them out. I try to avoid breakfast meetings because they infringe on my morning time with the Lord. I let other people handle matters rather than trying to do it all myself. I work at slowing down.

Rather than allow our lives to be drowned in busyness, let us all leave margins for rest, quiet and for the unexpected good and unanticipated bad things that come our way.

Prescription #3 is the most important. It is to put God first. To put God first means that everything else is not first. Nothing else can be first if God is first—not family, job, friendships, money, happiness or health. Jesus didn't have a complete list, but you get the idea from what he said in Matthew 6:25-34:

"Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

That is not a call to irresponsibility. It is an invitation to make everything we do a subset of trusting God and putting him first.

A pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan, prepared a sermon on coming before God in silence. As he walked onto the platform a quote from the Old Testament about being quiet and still before God was projected on the screens. He sat down and was silent before God for 45 minutes. He never spoke a word. When the time was up he simply walked off the platform. Some say it was one of the most profound sermons they had ever experienced. The next week the whole city was abuzz about it.

Try it for 90 seconds.

And remember that God tells us in Psalm 37:7, *"Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him."* And in Psalm 46:10, *"Be still, and know that I am God."*

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