

“Christian Time Management” (Eph. 5:15-17) Pentecost 10, August 16, 2009

Thursday morning, as I hit the snooze button one time too many, a quote from Stephen Covey popped into my head – to the effect that “*time management*” is a misnomer; the real challenge is to manage ourselves – which, of course, I wasn’t doing just lying there hitting the snooze button. So that thought got me out of bed real fast! Guilt. Shame. They work better than any alarm!

But what Covey said is true, isn’t it? The real challenge *is* to manage ourselves. And that’s especially true when we’re talking about Christian time management.

I mean, lots of us have been to time management seminars, so we know the drill. Some razzle-dazzle speaker inspires us with the vision of better-organized lives. To that end, we learn to identify pitfalls and time-wasters. We learn clever tricks to maximize our time. Afterward, we go out and buy ourselves a Day Planner. We may even use it! And all of this helps to some degree. But as Christians, we still need to ask ourselves: *However many things I squeeze into my day, are they the right things, and am I doing them the right way for the right reasons? However well I schedule my priorities, are they the right priorities, and am I pursuing them the right way, for the right reasons?* You see? Learning to schedule ourselves is one thing, but learning to manage ourselves goes much deeper. And that is the real challenge when it comes to our use of time.

As Christians, we know that time is a trust from God. We are not owners of our time, who can do with it what we please. We are stewards of our time – managers – responsible to God for how we use it. And frankly, God doesn’t care nearly so much about the *quantity* of things we squeeze in as He does about the *quality* of our lives – what we’re doing, how we’re doing it, why we’re doing it. So Christian time management will look a little different. To some, it might seem a waste of time taking a whole day off each week to rest the body and refresh the spirit. To God, it’s a wise investment of time! To some, it might seem foolish putting prayer time and family time ahead of “getting things done.” To God, it’s how life is meant to be. Our goal is not doing, doing, doing as much as we can. Our goal is growing, changing, loving; becoming as much as we can; becoming more and more like Christ. That is why Christian time management is really about self-management. It’s about using our time in a way that pleases God, fulfills His purpose in our lives, and ultimately stands the test of eternity.

So how do we learn Christian time management? Scripture is full of guidance, and we find quite a bit in our text. St. Paul writes: “**Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.**”

The last phrase shows us where Christian time management must begin: “**Understand what the will of the Lord is.**” Why should this come first? Let

me illustrate with a practical example. If you've ever brought home some kind of do-it-yourself kit, you know how tempting it can be to just dive right in putting it together without reading the instructions. Why waste time, right? But unfortunately, that doesn't always work. Sometimes we get into the project and realize things just aren't coming together the way they should. We try and try to figure it out – but in vain! So finally, we turn to the instructions; read them carefully. "Oh! That's what I should have done." Then we have to take things apart and put them together the right way – which, of course, takes more time and causes more stress than if we'd just read the instructions in the first place. Obviously, this is not good time management! And it's not good *Christian* time management to live our lives the same way – that is, to dive right in without reading God's instructions first. Here even more, we can spare ourselves a lot of time and stress if we first "**understand what the will of the Lord is.**"

This, of course, means taking time each day for devotions – time for prayer, time for reading Scripture, time for reflection upon it. There is no better way to make the most of the day than to start out talking to God and listening to His Word. Unfortunately, many Christians have lost this habit. Many see daily devotions as optional, something to be fit in when and if they can. Why, I even remember hearing a pastor tell how he just couldn't fit in devotions because it interfered with his morning run! That's just sad! Daily time with God helps us make the most of our time by shaping our priorities according to God's will, by tapping into God's resources, and by focusing us on God Himself. We'll be better prepared for the day if we begin it with God. We'll make better use of the day if we first "**understand what the will of the Lord is.**"

And let's be clear, this needs to be a *fresh* understanding – fresh each day. Most of us know what the Bible teaches – at least, the basics. But putting these teachings together, prayerfully discerning how they apply, using them to manage ourselves this day, in this place, this relationship, this situation – that's what matters. And that's something that takes daily attention – at least daily! Like it or not, we can't just coast along. To stay on top we need to keep our spiritual connection fresh – fresh each day. So this is the first principle of Christian time management: "**Understand what the will of the Lord is.**"

This will help us tackle the second principle: "**Make the most of the time.**" Now, when I was younger, I took this to mean: *Find ways to do important things when you have to spend time doing unimportant things.* "**Make the most of the time.**" And actually, I got pretty creative doing that. While vacuuming or washing dishes, I might practice my sermon. When driving here or there, I might listen to Bible cassettes. Why, on the wall of my bathroom shower I even taped up a plastic-covered prayer list, so I could use the time for more than just getting clean. As I said, I got pretty creative! And my proudest example? When I got called up for jury duty, instead of just sitting around, I brought a notebook and worked out the entire Basic Belief Seminar. "**Make the most of the time.**"

Looking back, I think those ideas were okay. But as I've dug a little deeper into the meaning of this verse, I've seen another side that's just as important. And that is to make the most of the time by focusing on what you're actually doing. Have you ever been involved in a conversation – only to find your thoughts wandering off somewhere else? Have you ever been spending time with someone – only to find yourself worrying about what you're supposed to do next? For that matter, have you ever been sitting through a sermon – and a good one on something important – only to find yourself thinking about your to-do list at home, or where you should go for brunch, or how much so-and-so needs to hear this sermon? It happens, doesn't it? We make the time, but we don't make the most of the time, because we let our focus drift off somewhere else. And that's a self-management issue, isn't it? Being fully present, fully engaged, fully focused on this here right now – that's a self-management issue. And it's one we need to tackle if we want to make the most of our time.

Case in point: one of the best pastors I've ever known was Erling Wold, and one of the best things about him was his ability to be fully present, fully engaged, fully focused on whomever he was talking to. I remember someone saying, "Whenever you meet Pastor Wold, it's like he's been waiting all day just to see you!" And that didn't come naturally! He'd be the first to admit it. He had to work at managing himself – work at paying total attention to this here right now. But it was so worth the effort! As a counselor, for instance, not much got past him. He picked up on things others might easily have missed. That alone made his ministry more fruitful. Plus the fact that people knew he was paying attention to them, knew he was interested and engaged. That made conversations more productive. So just staying focused like that, he made the most of the time.

And really, isn't that a lot like Jesus? Reading the Gospels, one of the things you notice is that Jesus never rushed, never got distracted. When He talked with someone, they always had His undivided attention. When He was doing something, He was always fully engaged. That's how *Jesus* made the most of His time, and that's our cue as well. You know, when we're talking with someone, it's not just rude to let our minds wander; it's a waste of time. What's more, we can miss out on relationship-building, some great insights, and even some wonderful opportunities. So it's worth the effort to be fully present, fully engaged, fully focused on this here right now. And that's the second principle of Christian time management: **"Make the most of the time."**

This brings us to the third principle. In our translation, it sounds pretty bland: **"Be careful how you live."** But the original Greek goes deeper. Paul tells us, **"See how accurately you are walking."** Now, I don't usually trot out the original Greek, but in this case, there's such a difference that I think it's worth noting. It's easy to tell someone, *"Be careful how you live."* It's like waving goodbye: *"Take care!"* But this is more specific, more pointed. Assuming that we do **"understand what the will of the Lord is,"** and assuming that we are trying to **"make the most of the time,"** this principle tells us to check up on ourselves,

check up on our progress. **“See how accurately you are walking.”** This is not just to see if we’re doing poorly. It’s also to see if we’re doing well – and see what specific progress we’re making. For self-management, both are worth knowing. So Paul says, **“See how accurately you are walking.”**

Ordinarily, I wouldn’t compare spiritual growth to oral hygiene, but I can’t help thinking how similar this is to my regular check up at the dentist. Before I started with Dr. Madsen, it had been a long time since I’d gone to the dentist, and there was a lot of work that needed to be done. So now, when he and the oral hygienist take a look, they bring up both negative and positive. *“You’re doing really well with the flossing!” “Gum care looks good!” “Maybe spend a little more time working on the back corners.”* Things like that; both the negative and the positive. And for the sake of my health, both are worth knowing, aren’t they? It’s the same with a spiritual check up. Maybe we’re doing well when it comes to service. Maybe personal morality looks good. But maybe we need to spend more time working on patience and forgiving others. These things are even more worth knowing. That’s why Paul says, **“See how accurately you are walking.”**

So when might we do this check up? For starters, why not make it part of our daily Bible study? Here’s what God’s Word says. Compare it to what we do. **“See how accurately you are walking.”** We can also do it at the end of the day. Traditionally, we Lutherans have taken time before bed to go over the day, examine our conscience, and confess our sins, asking God to forgive us and help to do better. This would be a *natural* time to **“see how accurately you are walking.”** Now and then, we might even take a bigger chunk of time to look more closely at our lives. In my former church, there was a couple who used to go off on retreat once a year to take stock of their lives, then make an appointment with me to talk about what they’d discerned – again, both the negatives and the positives. That’s really a good way to **“see how accurately you are walking.”** The main thing is to do it – especially if you’re serious about self-management! I mean, how can you know how you’re doing unless you check up on how you’re doing? So this third principle is crucial: **“See how accurately you are walking.”**

I love this quote from Michael Altshuler: *“The bad news is that time flies. The good news is that you’re the pilot!”* We really can manage our time, but to do that well, we need to manage ourselves. St. Paul’s words give us three good principles for doing that. First, use prayer, Scripture, and reflection to be sure we **“understand what the will of the Lord is.”** Second, do all we can to **“make the most of the time.”** And last but not least, check up on ourselves on a regular basis: **“See how accurately you are walking.”** When we do this, we will be practicing Christian time management. Amen.