

Dear Pastor, Keep This in Mind When There is “Too Much to Do”

Eight Pieces of Advice

I’ve been asked if I have any suggestions for sorting out how to live when there is “too much to do.” With the preface in mind that the “preacher practiceth not what he preacheth,” here are a few thoughts:

1. It is better to do fewer things well than many things poorly.

My father was once conversing with me about how he had lived his life. Almost poignantly, he said: “Son, I wish I had done fewer things better.” I was young then, and I did not really understand what he meant.

Young men have a way of becoming old men. Among the most surprised people in the world is the young man who discovers that he is becoming old. I have gone through my surprise stage. Now that I am old, I understand what my father was trying to tell me. Life can become a blur of unremitting activity. We can live it without thinking about what we are doing. Far better is it to pause, think, and then choose to do fewer things better.

2. For the Christian walking with the Lord there will always be too many things to do.

This should come as no revelation. We live in a hurting world in which our “neighbors” have endless physical and spiritual needs. That you should in one sense feel overwhelmed by what you perceive to be needs in the church and in the world around us is a normal Christian experience.

3. The Christian is not able to do all the good and worthy things known to him or her.

We cannot right every wrong or bind up every wound. This realization may frustrate us. But we must confess that we are not all-powerful and that there are limits to our human resources. In this context we must learn how to say no even to some very worthy causes.

4. Generally speaking, we should choose to do those things that are in line with our gifts.

If I have the gift of teaching but cannot keep my checkbook in order, then I should teach and not try to be an administrator or church treasurer. Effectiveness in ministry is enhanced enormously if a person’s area of service matches his or her gifts. Other people in the body of Christ will have the gifts to do the things I cannot do well.

5. We should try to avoid living “what-if” lives.

I have encountered senior Christian leaders who tended in their later years to ask themselves, “What if I had tried harder when I was doing this or doing that?” As they reminisce, they focus inordinate attention on the “what ifs.” Far better when you do something to do it with all your might. Then you will not be prone to say later, “What if I had really tried?” In point of fact, you know that you really did try. The same principle applies to the choices you make. Work out your priorities as thoughtfully and as prayerfully as you can, and then do not keep trying to second-guess yourself. God is still sovereign, and only he has the right to keep the books. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 4:1–7.

6. When all is said and done, a pastor should remember what his principal roles are—to preach and to teach and to care tenderly for the flock.

If you get caught up in a CEO mentality (your essential goal is to direct a smoothly running church), and yet the word of God is not preached with knowledge and the Spirit’s power, the ordinances are not faithfully administered, worship and prayer and evangelism are no longer central (protestations notwithstanding), and there is neither deep and growing

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knowledge of God nor any church discipline, then you have become the leader of a slick organization rather than a pastor in Christ's church. Keep focused on your calling.

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that there are limits to our human resources.*

7. We must learn to relax in the Lord and rest in the assurance that he is building his church.

I have met many frustrated pastors who are exhausted in the Lord's service. Somehow they have converted that sense of exhaustion into a sign that they are following Christ as true disciples. At the same time, they may confess that they are irritable and frustrated. I do not believe that this pattern of existence is what the Lord generally intends for his servants. How encouraging on the other hand to encounter a pastor who, despite all the challenges and difficulties of the ministry, possesses a serenity of spirit. From what does this serenity spring? You know that he spends time with the Master and meditates on the word of God. He is following the lifestyle set forth in Psalm 1.

8. At a purely practical level, make lists of the things you must do, prioritize them, and work through the lists, checking off the completed tasks as you go.

Crossing things off not only helps you to see where you are, but shows you what you have accomplished. After a few weeks or months of such discipline, you tend to estimate more accurately how long a task will take. If something is not completed (perhaps because of an unforeseen emergency), it will be among the lowest items on the list if you have prioritized the tasks. And once you start working through your list, do not lightly turn aside from it (for example, because the mail has just arrived). Slot in time for such tasks, but do not continually sacrifice the important on the altar of the urgent.

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