

Hope for the Holidays

The Complete Series



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A two-part look at de-stressing and being thankful.

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perspective can only be explained by an intervention of God. Rather than continue to whine and complain about his missing piece, he is able to say, “Therefore I am content . . . for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:9-10). God doesn’t always restore our missing pieces. Sometimes restoration happens and we can be especially thankful. It doesn’t always happen. But whether the missing piece is found or the thorn in the flesh continues to be there, God can bring about a radical change in our attitude. That’s what the woman who touched Jesus experienced. Thanksgiving replaced her bitterness. Peace of mind replaced her torment and anguish. In Paul’s case, his thorn in the flesh became a gift to be used to benefit others through his ministry.

For eight long years I struggled with a health condition that nearly led me to quit the pastoral ministry. I was suffering from panic attacks and stress-induced anxiety. At one point I couldn’t sleep or even eat and was down to 129 pounds. Yet this thorn in the flesh, this missing piece occurred during one of the most renewing periods in the congregation I was serving. I continue to be amazed at how God used me in spite of my weaknesses.

I’m reminded of the great story from Beethoven’s life. At the zenith of his career the composer was stricken with a progressive disease that made him totally deaf. Retreating to a monastery he sought help from God and received a surprising answer. He began to hear new music in his mind. Writing furiously, he transferred silent sounds to musical notes of praise to God, music of joy and tremendous power. The result was his famous Ninth Symphony with it’s striking phrase: “Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee.”

Watching the conductor and orchestra perform this great piece, the deaf Beethoven felt the vibrations of the music with his feet. At the end of the concert the conductor turned him around so he could face his audience and see their thunderous applause and the tears of joy on their faces. Isn’t it incredible that after losing his hearing, Beethoven could write a great piece of music reflecting praise and thanksgiving to God? What’s good about a life with a missing piece is what God can still do in spite of it or even because of it. That’s worthy of giving thanks.

So I hope that you’ve gotten in touch with your missing piece this morning. But more importantly, I hope you’re getting to thanksgiving, confident that God can take an area of weakness and turn it into an area of greatest strength. I pray that you will let Christ take you to that place of true thanksgiving.

true thanksgiving a lot quicker, because it will no longer be about us; it will be about God.

To her credit, the woman in our story did not turn back. She presses on to the head of the line until she meets up with the transforming power of God. The text says she pushed through the crowd, and when she came to Jesus, reached out to touch him. He stopped and looked at her. Then she fell face down and told him the whole truth, pouring out here heart and holding nothing back.

There is something freeing about a place where people can allow themselves to drop their disguises and be who they really are, where there is no pretense or false front. Do you think St. Andrew's is that kind of place? A community of faith that can handle the truth—without judgment, without rejection, without shame? Are we a community where it is safe to say: "I fell down"? Because you see, I believe that's what our Lord is calling us to do and be; not a place where everyone has it all together, but a place where broken people can find healing and understanding.

Have you ever had the frustration of purchasing something that you had to assemble, only to find, that when you got into the project a piece was missing? Isn't that true for our lives as well? We have a piece or two missing and none of us are complete. What is it for you?

- Education you were not able to acquire
- Acceptance, affection, intimacy that didn't happen
- A physical or emotional deficiency that forces you to walk through life with a limp
- An unfulfilled dream or loss that you can't get off your mind

There's something I respect and admire about how alcoholics and addicts introduce themselves at a meeting: "Hi, I'm Tom, and I'm an alcoholic." It's so honest and refreshing. Would you quickly turn to someone sitting next to you and say to them, "Hi, I'm _____, and I have a piece missing."

How did that feel? If you look at our other scripture you'll find that the apostle Paul had a missing piece and he wasn't afraid to admit it. He struggled with what he called his "thorn in the flesh." In our passage from 2 Corinthians 12, he writes, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

What amazes me is that Paul was able to boast about his weakness because he had experienced a radical change of attitude. Such a change in

God's Antidote to Busyness

(Psalm 127:2; Exodus 20:8-11; Matthew 11:28-30)

Our children, Adam and Kristen, were great fans of the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon strip, and a few years ago, they showed me a cartoon with this caption. It said, "God put me on earth to accomplish a certain number of things. Right now I am so far behind I will never die." How many of you have ever felt like that? Like you never, ever have enough time? Well, you are not alone. Remember that Time magazine cover a while back with this theme: "The Rat Race: How America is Running Itself Ragged." Today and next week Tom and I are going to look at some of the most common causes of stress in our contemporary world, particularly in the pre-Holiday time of the year.



Ours is a pressure cooker society, and so today I want to share with you a possible prescription for people under time pressure. I'd like to begin by asking you to take a little quiz to see if you are experiencing this kind of pressure. I'd like you to honestly think about your answers to these questions. Number One: Are you always in a hurry? Number Two: Is your "To do" list always unrealistically long? Number Three: Do you use your days off to catch up with unfinished work? Number Four: Has more than one person ever told you to slow down? Number Five: Do you feel guilty when you relax? Number Six: Do you have to get sick to take time off? Now how many of you answered "Yes" to at least one of these questions? Then perhaps the message today will have a special word for you. Now I don't think that this is the kind of life God wants us to live. Psalm 127:2 states, "It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for God gives sleep to his beloved." Or in other words...if you are burning the candle at both ends, you're not as bright as you think you are. Look at this picture of God's intent for us from Psalm 23:2 "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters." God is referring to rest and refreshment and our renewal. God doesn't want us to be working all the time because God wants us to live a whole, balanced, and complete life. And I am convinced that when we give our lives to Christ, he's probably not going to add more on, as much as he's going to take some things out of it to slow us down.

A recent CNN poll stated that 62% of all Americans would like to show down and relax more, and yet another pole indicated that we have 8.5 hours less leisure time a week than we did a decade ago. We're working more and

enjoying it less. So this morning I want to share with you this simple prescription for pressured people. You could call it God's way to RELAX. Using the acrostic R.E.L.A.X. I want to suggest five steps for dealing with the busyness in our lives. First, we need to *Realize* our worth. Second, *Enjoy* what we already have. Third, *Limit* our labor. Fourth, *Adjust* our values. Fifth, *eXchange* our pressure for God's peace. Let's begin with the first step: Realize our worth. I believe that the reason many people overwork is because they confuse their work and their worth. We think that if we work a whole lot, achieve a lot, we're worth a lot. We confuse what we do with who we are. In America, most of receive our primary identity from what we do. Look at how we meet each other. After we find out a person's name, usually the second question is "What do you do?" We are lead to believe that we get our worth from our work.

But that is not what our faith teaches us. Christianity proclaims that we are valuable, precious beings regardless of what our work is. Too many of you grew up with that little phrase in your mind that says, "you're a nobody." Maybe a teacher told you that, or a former friend, or a brother or sister. Maybe one of your parents said, "You're never going to amount to much." So the real reason you overwork is to say, "I'll show them. I will prove my worth by my accomplishments, my achievements."

But the problem is you can never accomplish enough to feel really satisfied, really secure. And so years later you are still hearing that little inner voice that says, "You've got to keep paddling. You've got to keep working. Somebody may catch up. Somebody may get ahead of you. You've got to prove your value, your significance, your worth, by overworking." And you can never slow down.

Now the antidote to this kind of busyness is to realize what God says about you. James 1:18, "By his own will he brought us into being through the word of truth, so that we should have first place among all his creatures." (GN) God says you matter more than all the rest of creation. You can relax. You don't have to prove your worth by overworking. God says you are OK. I think that when you really understand what you are worth to God, it will change your life. You'll find out that you don't have to spend your whole life trying to win the approval of other people in order to be happy. But you do need to realize how valuable you are to God.

The good news of the Christian faith is that there is nothing you can ever do in life that will make God love you more than God already does. And there is nothing you can ever do that will make God love you any less, because God's love is not based on your performance. It's an unconditional

one person. That is what the woman discovered. In her desperation she got in touch with the power of God!

In this story we see a crowd that is pressing against Jesus, but only one person really touches him. The scene is a chaotic flurry of bodies surrounding Jesus as they all move in one direction to fulfill a very noble agenda: the healing of a rich and powerful man's daughter.

Yet this woman swallows her pride and reaches out to Jesus. Yes, pride dissolves when people are desperate, doesn't it? That's why desperation may just be your best asset this Thanksgiving. It might just drive you to God.

When the woman reaches out to touch Jesus, he stops because he knows her touch was full of faith. His statement "who touched me?" wasn't a rebuke, so much as a statement of surprised gladness. He knew someone really needed him. So he stopped and gave her his undivided attention.

Sometimes people feel they can't get God to notice them. God doesn't have the time or is focused on more important things. It certainly looked that way in this story. Jesus was on his way to heal the daughter of a rich and powerful person. What could be more important than that? To the woman's surprise, Jesus stopped and listened. Have you noticed that God seems to do some of his best work in desperate circumstances? When people have nothing left but him? The Old Testament is full of stories like these:

- Abraham and Sarah were too old to have a baby. Not kind of old, way too old. But God provides.
- Joseph was thrown into a pit by his jealous brothers, sold into slavery and sent to prison. Circumstances God used for redemption.

The woman in our story had grown tired. The old ways of coping with her life weren't working. And she was desperate, so she went up and touched the Master. One of the things that impressed me about this church when Patty and I first met with the pastor nominating committee was your honesty and openness in telling it like it is. Some of you were tired. Others were feeling discouraged. There was almost a sense of desperation, because you knew you weren't able to turn things around on your own.

The first step of Alcoholics Anonymous says, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable. The second says, "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." I remember a time a woman came to see Patty about her alcoholic husband. She was desperate and said, "I think he's got a serious drinking problem." She was caught totally off guard by Patty's response: "That's great! The best time to get help is when you've hit bottom!" When we become willing to tell things as they really are, we can get to a place of

Getting to Thanksgiving

(2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Mark 5:21-34)

Have you made your plans for Thanksgiving yet? As both of our young adult children are off at college or teaching, we'll be spending the holiday with friends. I love Thanksgiving. Maybe it's the time of year with all of the fall colors, but if the truth be told I actually prefer it to Christmas. I mean, it's so much easier. For example, I've never had to return a Thanksgiving gift, never gotten a bad turkey, never had to put up a string of Thanksgiving lights around the house. And I've never had to shell out \$50 for a dead Thanksgiving tree. And because we're going over to the home of some friends all we have to do is to bring a couple of cans of cranberries and the veggies. What a deal!



But I love Thanksgiving for another reason: It's about being thankful for what you have. This morning I hope you'll join me in using this little piece of paper to come up with your own personalized list of things you're thankful for. To help prime the pump, I want to reflect with you on the scriptures we heard a few moments ago as a way of getting ready for Thanksgiving.

In Mark 5 a woman appears who for twelve years had been riddled with an embarrassing and debilitating condition. For twelve years she had tried to find a cure, exhausting all of her resources only to be shunned by a very hardened society. The medical community was out of ideas.

She was out of money so the financial community saw her as a high risk. People excluded her because her disease placed her in the category of an outcast. Even the religious community rejected her because they considered her unclean and her condition a result of her sin. Her journey began in desperation. She was weighed down with loneliness and abandonment; wrestling with feelings of insignificance and failure. And she came to the realization that this was something she couldn't fix herself.

Can you relate to her situation? Are your family dynamics frustrating you as you enter the holiday season? Are you here this morning after a difficult semester of college or your career choice has lost its luster? Are you struggling with a chronic health problem that only seems to get worse? Are there circumstances that have you feeling more than a little down? If so you can you identify with this woman's plight.

She was feeling desperate. And believe it or not, desperation can actually be a good place. It means you've run every idea, every resource, every plan into the ground and have nowhere else to turn—EXCEPT one place,

love—a free gift to you. So the first part of God's antidote to busyness is to realize your worth.

The second part is "E"—enjoy what you already have. Ecclesiastes 3:13 says, "All of us should enjoy what we have worked for. It is God's gift." (GN) Is it possible to be so preoccupied with getting more that you don't enjoy what you've got? Sure it is. Any of us can get so busy with the desire to acquire more and more that we don't enjoy what's already in our own garages. It is so easy to get into that syndrome—the desire to acquire syndrome. We look around at our neighbors or friends and see what they've got and then we've got to get that. They move up and so we think we've got to move up. We exhaust ourselves trying to keep up with the Jones not realizing that they just refinanced or filed for bankruptcy.

And so the syndrome goes. We buy things we don't need, with money we don't have, to impress people we don't even like. We try to get more and more, and before long we get overextended financially. We end up spending all of our time making payments on all these things we've bought and inevitably our relationships begin to deteriorate. That's just not the way God wants us to live. Ecclesiastes 4:6 says, "It is better to have only a little, with peace of mind, than be busy all the time..."(GN) So the second step in dealing with busyness is to enjoy what we have while we've got it and not worry about getting more all of the time.

The third part of God's antidote to busyness is to limit our labor. We must make a conscious decision to make time for other things besides work. We have to decide how many hours we realistically want to spend working each week and then we need to stick to it. We need to schedule time for ourselves, time with God alone, time with our family and friends, and time for service to others. All these are important elements in our lives as well as our work.

Someone else once said that you know you're a workaholic when...all your Christmas cards come from business associates...or you head out for "Back to School" night and you can't remember which school your kids attend...or you wear a beeper to church...or your family refers to you as the "occupant"...or if you take business related reading material into the bathroom.

God knew how very important it would be for us to limit our labor—a day of rest was included in the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 20 God says: "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God." The word sabbath means a day a rest. God says that one day off every week is the rule. Every seventh day, we need to

take a day off or we're breaking the ten commandments.

But what should you do on your day off, your Sabbath? First we need to rest our bodies on our Sabbath. If we don't take time to rest our body, our body will make time to rest itself, either in the hospital or with a cold or the flu. Our best requires rest. Do you feel guilty when you relax? Jesus didn't. He took time off. Are you busier than Jesus? Is what you're doing more important than what Jesus did?

Secondly, we need to recharge our emotions on our Sabbath. Think about what things recharge you emotionally? You need quietness. You need recreation. You need time for relationships. We were made for relationships and they take time to build.

Third, we need to refocus our spirit on our Sabbath. The Scriptures call this worship. Worship brings things into perspective. When you come into church with a big problem, worship puts it into perspective. You have more energy to deal with the problem and more understanding. You need time alone with God every day. If you're too busy for God you're too busy. So God wants us to limit our labor.

The fourth step in dealing with busyness is to adjust our values. In order to reduce busyness in our life we need to change our thinking about what is really important. Ecclesiastes 4:4 says, "I have also learned why people work so hard to succeed; it's because they envy the things their neighbors have. But it's useless. It is like chasing the wind." (GN) We have to stop and say we are not going to get caught up in the rat race of always getting more, that there are some things far more important in life than getting more.

Jesus says in Mark 8, "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Jesus is asking us to consider the question, "Is it worth it?" That's the question we need to ask ourselves about every area of our lives. For instance, we may be making great money right now, but are the kids getting any parenting? They're going to be gone in a few more years. Will we regret our choices then? Because no matter how much we make we can and will lose it all in the end anyway.

Finally, the fifth part of God's antidote to busyness is to exchange our pressure for God's peace, to exchange our pressure for God's peace. This gets at the very root of our stress. Did you know that there are three kinds of fatigue? There is physical fatigue—that's the tired muscles, sore body kind of fatigue, and that kind of fatigue can be replenished pretty quickly. Then there is emotional fatigue—the tired emotions and stressed out feelings kind of fatigue. Finally, there is spiritual fatigue—the kind of fatigue that results in a dry spirit and a lack of connection with God. And this is the deepest kind

of fatigue.

Sure, you may need to take a vacation. But a vacation alone will not address emotional or spiritual fatigue. The antidote for those kinds of fatigue is a relationship with the living God. You can take a two-week vacation in Tahiti, but when you come back, you're still going to have the same problems. The pressures are still going to be there. God's way to rest and relaxation means far more than just taking time off; it means readjusting our values and learning to exchange our pressure for God's peace.

The best antidote I know for the out-of-control busyness that so often plagues our lives is a relationship with Christ, who will help us set the pace of our lives. He knows us inside and out, better than we even know ourselves. As our pacesetter he can help us exchange our pressure for his peace. When we live for God, it is not only the right way, it is the healthy way, the whole way, the balanced way, and the most relaxing way. Are you stressed out, tired and weary? In Matthew 11:28 Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Jesus wants us to get away with him, to learn to really rest and to recover our lives. Someone has written a wonderful paraphrase of Psalm 23 for busy people that I'd like to end with this morning. It goes like this. "The Lord is my pacesetter, I shall not rush. He makes me stop and rest at intervals. He provides me with images of stillness to restore my serenity. He leads me in the way of efficiency to calmness of mind and his guidance is peace. Even though I have a great many things to accomplish this day, I will not fret for His presence is here. His timeliness, his all importance will keep me in balance. He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity, anointing my head with oils of tranquility. My cup of joyous energy overflows. Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruits of my hours, for I shall walk in the pace of my Lord and dwell in his house forever."

Now that's the way I want to live this next week. How about you?

Let's pray... Like salt poured out of the shaker, O God, pour my life out. Wherever you want me to go, I'll go. Whatever you want me to do, I'll do. Amen.