



## Growing out of a poverty of time

When teams of volunteers come in the summer to work on homes for the needy, elderly and disabled, I get a number of questions about poverty. It is always a surprise to those who come to hear that there are many different definitions of poverty or kinds of poverty. They are especially surprised when I tell them that I see a particularly insidious poverty in the teams that come to work with us. They always try to guess what it is and usually fall back on the idea of being poor in spirit. But that's not it.

**I believe that the most damaging poverty in our culture is a poverty of time.** An African once noted, *"Americans all have wrist watches, but they never have time."* That pretty much captures it.

All of us are guilty of it. We are so busy that there are not enough hours in a day to meet our time demands. We have filled our life with all kinds of activity and have labeled most of it urgent. Our technology, cell phones, Ipads, computers, Ipods, MP3 players, all grasp/compete for our attention and time. I believe that this hyperactivity is fueled by our culture's labeling anything that does not move at the speed of thought, boring. And in modern culture being bored is a horrendous thing. Hence, even solitude and silence are stigmatized. On a personal level, **we buy into the idea that the busier we are, the more significant our life.** Our busyness supposedly reflects back to us our value or indispensability. It certainly keeps us distracted.

We all complain about how this busyness pulls us away from the truly important. We decry missed recitals of our children, late arrivals at special dinners with our sweetheart, and missed opportunities. Still, we fill our schedules. Granted, sometimes others fill our schedules for us, such as bosses who want extra time. For the most part, we are in control. Just because opportunity knocks, we don't have to answer. It's a weighing of values.

**How we spend our time shapes how we live morally.** Time constrains morality and too often forces choices that dishonor God. Our over-commitments and their appetite for time have been immortalized in poem and song. Most have heard the song *Cat's in the Cradle* and nodded their head in recognition of time lost with family and how it shapes children. Then there's the Princeton study of ministers who were to deliver a sermon on The Good Samaritan and walked by an injured person on the way to give their speech. The key defining factor as to whether or not they would stop was how much time they had. Those pressed for time hurried by.

Time is our only inventory and we have no idea of how much we have, we just draw from it daily. **Time management is more than getting your schedule tight and right, it involves prioritizing so that the most important things receive adequate time.**

Time usage reveals commitment. Time usage reveals affection. Time usage reveals life goals. Time usage shapes our future in eternity. The sum total of our life is as a breath. Yet, within that breath are countless moments that can be savored and extended in our perception when fully lived. To truly live life, capturing all that God intended, involves living in the now in a manner that tunes our heart to what is truly important. **On our death bed, before the great audit, we will not regret not being busy enough or failing to invest more time at work, or not reaching the ultimate level in our video game.** We will regret failing to more completely love those in our midst, failing to spend more time in worship and communion with God, failing to serve God and our fellow travelers more deeply, failing to truly savor life. In those final moments we will struggle to expand time, extend time, we will finally see time's value and purpose. The speed with which those final moments pass will reveal to us our follies and our fabulous successes. Would that the crystalline clarity we experience then capture our thoughts now, enabling us to reorder, refocus, and redirect our activity to resonate more with eternity and God's grand design.

**I believe that there are four things you can begin to do now to start the steady climb out of time poverty.** All require personal examination and intentional action. We must embark to recapture, free, schedule with God's priorities in mind and transform time.

**Time Captured**—Most of us lose a lot of time. It can be lost dawdling in a waiting room, vegging on an Ipod, or traveling from one place to another in your car, among other things. These fleeting, empty moments can be recaptured by merely being intentional in their use. Load the scriptures on your Ipod and meditate on God's Word instead of grooving to Lady Gaga. Turn off talk radio and turn travel time into prayer time. Use waiting for prayer or reflection on God's work and Word in your life. Catch those fleeting moments and discover their hidden potential. This is a good, painless, first step in climbing out of your time deficit. The next steps require more sacrifice and discipline.

**Time Freed**—Some of our time is wasted on activities that, in the warp and woof of eternity, add little to our life or advancing God's Kingdom. These activities need to be dropped. This is never easy since we all invest a portion of our ego in our actions and like to fill our time with things that are fulfilling. **The things which crowd our schedule may not be in themselves bad; they are just expendable when weighed against our responsibilities to God.** As fun, interesting, and fulfilling as these time consuming, but expendable activities may be, their elimination opens up involvement in that which will have a greater return in God's Kingdom. Others may be able to continue in the activities you drop, but because of your desire to draw closer to Christ and become more involved in advancing His Kingdom, you choose to walk away. **You and Christ together must scrutinize your schedule**, searching for those areas where you open windows of time for being with and serving God. It's important to have margin, flexibility or unused time in your daily life. Ministry is never convenient; it's always an interruption so having some flex in your schedule is important. Ultimately, it takes you to the next step in which you become even more intentional about your time use.

**Time Made**—Nothing is more intentional about time usage than specifically blocking out time on your calendar. Need personal time with God? Make it. Need time to put your head knowledge of following Christ into action? Make it. **One thing I think every family needs to schedule is at least one meal a day when the whole family sits down together to eat and talk.** This should be sacrosanct time, non-negotiable. Keeping this commitment does a great deal to keeping the cohesion of the family and avoiding having family members develop a "Marriot Suites" view of the home, a place to crash before hooking up with friends, school or work. **The time that we schedule says a lot about what we value.** It's been said that by looking at a person's checkbook and their time schedule, you can determine where their true affections and allegiances lie. If you want your life with Christ to be first priority, begin by making time to study His Word, pray and serve. This is true for individuals and for families. This is single use time, time focused on a specific thing. Another way to grow out of time poverty is to transform how your time is used.

**Time Transformed**—Most of the methods mentioned above focus on single use or mono-chronic approaches to time. What is neat is that God made us in such a way that we can do more than one thing at once. **We can maximize time use by transforming common moments in to communion moments.** This is not multi-tasking. It speaks to something deeper. Multi-tasking may involve doing dishes while you are also cooking. Transforming time would involve something like washing dishes or mowing the lawn while worshiping God. **It is not merely the addition of a new task, it involves the addition of a new investment or new level of consciousness.** It is being fully in the now. All of us have tasks that we find ourselves doing on auto-pilot because they are repetitive or so simple in nature that we are able to disengage our minds. These tasks can be transformed into times of prayer, worship, scripture memorization, and reflection on God's word or work in our life. The common is transformed and moments which were filled with an activity are taken to a new level spiritually by our intentional focus.

**Growing out of time poverty takes work.** Throughout this article you see the word intentional. It takes focused effort to free up time for God's agenda. In seeking to align our time usage with God's values we face many decision points that are like forks in the road. The question is which path do we take? One path may represent our personal interests, desires or ambitions. It may also represent the activities expected by our family,

our employer, or our culture. The other represents God's agenda and His role in our life and family. To follow God always involves sacrifice and a relinquishing of our "rights".

*There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death. Prov 14:12.*

The most difficult choices are when you must choose between what appears to be competing "goods".

Activities which are nice, fun, or enriching but which conflict with something God would have you do instead.

Taming your use of time frees you to pursue God and embody His master plan for your life. Releasing those things which tie us up, entangle us, provides the possibility of releasing the power of God's Spirit in our life as we direct more attention to loving and following Him in obedience. It will also enable us to more enjoy life. Jesus said, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*" (Matthew 11:28-29) The time we spend in prayer, worshipping and serving Him acts as a balm to our soul. It refreshes us, provides significance in what often appears an absurd world. It nurtures our soul and settles our life into an inner rest and peace. Are you harried? Overburdened? Feel more like a human doing than a human being? He bids you come. To do so requires time.

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