

Stewards of time

The time of your life

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14; Luke 10:38-42

"Most men pursue pleasure with such breathless haste that they hurry past it." – Søren Kierkegaard

"Even a clock that does not work is right twice a day." – Polish Proverb

We probably have more than 20 watches and clocks on various electronic devices in our home. I carry at least two timepieces with me at all times – a wristwatch and a Blackberry. However, these timepieces rarely agree exactly with each other. In every case, they can be anywhere from several seconds to several minutes off.

As central as time is to each of us, most people seldom take the time to consider its role in life. Aside from temporal time, which is gauged by watches and calendars, there is another category we might call divine time – or all things eternal. What would happen if we thought about – and paid as much attention to – the things that are eternal as we do to events gauged by watches and calendars? Would our decisions of what is truly important be any different if we lived each day tuned into God's eternal time frame? Would our daily "to-do list" look different if we included a column for those things that impact the lives of others beyond the here and now?

The here and now

A person with one clock is only living with an awareness of the here and now. A person with two clocks – one that has an eye on eternity – is living with an awareness of God's ways and timing for things in this world and beyond. How many clocks are you in tune with? In what ways does living with both a temporal and an eternal clock impact our worldly and heavenly view?

Culturally, there is great divergence in how we understand and manage time. Could the same be said about how we view time from a spiritual point of view? As Christians

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living in this world, what we decide to do with the time we have should probably look different from those who see this life as all there is. Some cultures – mainly Western – impose a rigid and unforgiving attitude concerning the “good use” and management of time.

What does our attitude toward time (whether we’re mostly task-oriented or mostly people-oriented) say about our spiritual focus?

Time and culture

I was at a meeting recently where a Latino man was leading worship and invited other Latinos to join him in front to lead a song. After a brief pause, he said in a lighthearted way, “We’re not on Latino time here. I want you to come now.” Everyone in the group laughed, knowing he was recognizing a cultural difference between Latinos and people from other backgrounds who may tend to be more time conscious. Culturally, those from a European background have much to learn from our brothers and sisters who come from a cultural context with a stronger relational focus rather than a task orientation.

As Christians, the world we live in is a time warp of sorts. We are **in** the world, but we are not **of** it. We need to be aware of and engaged in the everyday realities of work and family responsibilities – temporal time. But we also need to be conscious of a time and reality beyond this life.

Ecclesiastes 3 reflects both views. In verses 1-8, seasons, or chapters, of life are referenced. To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven. When we get to verse 11, we have these words:

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ... I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him.
– Ecclesiastes 3:11, 14

In what ways does living with both a temporal and an eternal clock impact our worldly and heavenly view?

While we live in this world, we live with the tension between these two views of time. We live with daily responsibilities we need to manage. We can feel pressed by time as though it is our master. On the other hand, time is a gift offered to help us build relationships and spend time in quiet reflection. Since time will never end as we transition from this life to the next, we experience a little bit of heaven as we linger and enjoy the special moments of each day.

Time as gift

In Ecclesiastes 3, Solomon offers a view of time as a gift from God. Time is divided into seasons of life and life experiences rather than chopped into days, hours, minutes and seconds. When we view time as a gift, we realize it is here to serve us and we are not expected to become a slave to it. Just as the Sabbath was made for people, we should not feel bound by limitations brought on by busyness. Rather, we are called to receive these seasons of life as new opportunities to grow and serve.

What is the value of one year? Ask someone who has been diagnosed with a terminal disease.

What is the value of one month? Ask a mother whose baby arrived prematurely.

What is the value of one minute? Ask someone who just missed their plane.

What is the value of one second or a millisecond? Ask an Olympic athlete who came in second place.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- In Western society, we have turned time into a commodity that we buy and sell rather than view as a gift. Why do you think this is?
- How does the idea that “time is money” distort a biblical understanding of “time as gift”?
- What is the “value” of time if not viewed as money?

Time and the Bible

In the Scriptures, there are many references to time. We cannot help but note that the context of people living 4,000 years ago certainly affects the way they understood time in comparison to our 21st-century lives. There was far less concern for a literal accuracy of dates and times since they did not have the sophistication to measure time as we do today.

In the Bible, certain numbers took on symbolic meanings, such as the number 40. Forty simply meant a period of time, which may or may not have been intended to be taken literally. It often carried a sense of the sacred with it. We observe its usage on several occasions in both the Old and New Testaments:

- Noah and family were in the ark for 40 days and 40 nights.
- Moses was 40 when he was exiled to Sinai from Egypt.
- Moses remained in Sinai for 40 years.
- Moses was on Mt. Sinai 40 days and nights (two separate times).
- Twelve spies scouted out the land of Canaan for 40 days.
- Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.
- Elijah wandered in the wilderness for 40 days.
- Jonah warned Nineveh they had 40 days in which to repent.
- Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights.
- Jesus was present on Earth following his resurrection for 40 days before ascending to heaven.

When I turned 40, someone gave me a magnet that said, “40 isn’t old – if you’re a tree!” Well, that made me feel better!

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- What times or dates carry symbolic meaning in our settings?
- Are certain birthdays or anniversaries more significant than others? Why?

The Bedouin culture out of which the patriarchs came, and which is still alive and well in certain parts of the Middle East, has an interesting view of time. A story is told of a Westerner who was visiting a Bedouin group in order to learn more about their day-to-day activities. He asked the Bedouin leader,

“How long does it take to move your flock from one field to another?”

“Not long,” he was told.

“What time is tea served?” he asked.

“When the water boils,” the Bedouin replied.

“What time do you go to bed?” the man asked again.

“When I’m tired,” was the reply.

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- What about these answers do you like?
- Do you find yourself frustrated with this view of time?

Here is an honest confession put to the familiar form of Psalm 23. How true is it of your feelings on this issue?

Psalm 23 (Revised)
by Marica K. Hornok

The clock is my dictator, I shall not rest.
It makes me lie down only when exhausted.
It leads me into deep depression.
It hounds my soul.

It leads me in circles of frenzy,
It fills my life with activities.
Even though I run frantically from task to task,
I will never get it all done.

Deadlines and my need for approval, they drive me.
They demand performance from me,
Beyond the limits of my schedule.
They anoint my head with migraines, my in-basket overflows.

Surely fatigue and time pressures shall follow me,
All the days of my life.
And I will dwell in the bonds of frustration ... forever.

Mary, Martha and time

The story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42 offers a wonderful case study that connects so well to modern times. Beyond the message of the importance Jesus places on relationship, it is also a lesson in how we are to value and use time. Two sisters are preparing to entertain an important guest. When Jesus arrives, Mary immediately drops what she is doing and goes to visit with him. Martha, on the other hand, continues to work, thinking that is the greater good. Rather than spending time with Jesus like her sister, the Bible says Martha “was distracted by her many tasks.” (NRSV) When Martha complains about Mary’s lack of help, Jesus reprimands Martha and says Mary has chosen what is best.

After sharing this story once in a group, I had a modern-day Martha tell me that if Mary had continued to work a little longer, then both Mary and Martha would have been able to relax at the feet of Jesus. But what Jesus seems to be implying here is that time is primarily a tool for forging relationships rather than simply accomplishing tasks. For those of us who tend to be the Martha’s of this world, it is an important reminder to put first things first – which is relationships.

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Stephen Covey, in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, addresses a challenge faced by all of us. How do we separate those things in life that may **feel** urgent but may not be important from those things that **are** important but not necessarily urgent? The “urgent” is defined as things that call for our immediate attention but may not have long-term significance. We hear the phone ring during dinner, and we feel we need to jump up and answer it even though meals are important family time. We have people asking us to take on an activity that we feel compelled to do based on someone else’s need to fill a role rather than our own sense of call to that role. Does this sound familiar?

In contrast, what is truly important may not always be pressing in the moment. These things may be more people-oriented in nature and focused on attending to relationships we have neglected or even devotional activities needed to maintain our connection with God; important – yes, urgent – no.

An interesting exercise is to administer a time audit of all that we do in a given day. Make a list of your activities and then ask yourself the following questions:

- Of all the activities I gave attention to, which had eternal importance – or were focused on forging deeper relationships – and which were task-oriented and based on a short-term sense of urgency?
- From this list, what did I focus on that was based on someone else imposing their agenda on me rather than my own sense of what is important?
- Were there important things I neglected to do because other tasks distracted me?
- Learning to say no to the “good” in order to do what is “best” is a challenge we all face as we become stewards of the gift of time God has provided. How good are you at saying no, for the reason of doing what is truly important?

Jesus and Sabbath time

Jesus, as in most matters of life and faith, becomes a good model when thinking about prioritizing our time. In Mark 1:21 and Luke 4:16, the writers reflect on how Jesus went to the synagogue, as was his custom. Jesus modeled the value of visiting with the Mary’s and Martha’s, but he also paid attention to the broader community of faith as well.

Worship and gathering together with fellow believers fall into that category of what is important, but may not be urgent. We can all attest to how regular attendance in many of our churches has declined in the last decade, even as our overall membership has remained the same. It is increasingly acceptable to get away for the weekend and neglect Sunday morning worship and fellowship with our church family. What is truly important is not simply about what meets my needs, but has to do with what fosters the well-being of others I am in a committed relationship to – my church family. In addition to corporate worship, Jesus modeled personal Sabbath practices as well. In Mark 1:35-37, we read that while it was still dark, Jesus went to pray. Jesus clearly valued this as important time – time well spent.

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It could easily be argued that Jesus was busy, but never could it be said that he was rushed. Jesus seemed to understand that time is a gift to serve us and is not intended to be our dictator (see Mark 2:27).

Conclusion

Time is _____ .

- Temporal (limited) and eternal (unlimited)
- A gift of God, not a commodity to be bought and sold
- Seasonal – unclear starting and ending
- A tool from God – not our master

Discussion questions for reflection and sharing

- What reminders do you most need to take with you this week?
- What are the changes you have been challenged to address in your life?
- What new commitments concerning your use of time is the Holy Spirit inviting you to consider?

We are called to be stewards of the gift of time. Each new day/hour/minute is from God and as such should be cherished and shared for God’s eternal purposes.

Additional reading and small group discussion resources

Evans, Pamela. *The Overcommitted Christian: Serving God without Wearing Out*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001.

Ganger, Steve. *Time Warped: First Century Time Stewardship for 21st Century Living*. Goshen, IN: Mennonite Mutual Aid, 2004.

Miller, Lynn A. *The Power of Enough: Finding Contentment by Putting Stuff in Its Place*. Goshen, IN: Mennonite Mutual Aid, 2003.



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Student handout

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Getting started

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