

Your Productivity Isn't Your Problem

I don't typically write about things like productivity, although it is a topic that interests me. In fact, I do a lot of reading about productivity techniques, I'm a moderator of the [Productive Pastor group](#) on Facebook, and I've even done a couple of interviews for the [podcast](#) about productivity in ministry. I've spent significant energy trying to improve my own productivity and help others do the same.

The reason I haven't written much about it here, is because I try to focus my writing on spiritual issues. Things that affect the growth and maturity of everyday believers, some who serve in vocational ministry, some who don't. My goal is to work toward diagnosing the causes of spiritual malaise and encourage us on toward wholeness and health, through lives that are vibrantly spiritual and fully surrendered to the Holy Spirit.

I haven't written on productivity, because frankly, until recently I didn't realize that productivity, like almost everything else, is a spiritual issue.

I recently wrote an article about the [spiritual cost of distraction](#), where I confessed my own struggle with feeling constantly distracted by the many people and things vying for my attention, and [the toll it has taken](#) on me spiritually. Since writing that article, I have been on a personal journey of surrender and discovery. I have been asking God to remind

me what the work he has called me to is actually supposed to look like, and how I can most faithfully accomplish that work, while also being a faithful Christian, husband, father, and friend.

I have been wrestling with the conflict between my own carnal desires to please people and be “successful” according to the world’s standards, and God’s desire to have my whole heart, even and especially when that leads to self-sacrifice, misunderstanding, and obscurity. As a result of this, I have had to begin looking at my work as a pastor and scholar, and especially my productivity, through a new lens.

Surrender Your Calendar

The first major step I have had to take in my journey toward wholeness is to surrender my calendar to Christ. The writing of Eugene Peterson has convicted me deeply. He has shown me that my inability to effectively manage my own calendar is a spiritual issue. In the past, I have allowed other people, who often don’t understand the unique work of pastoral ministry, to define my priorities and how I will spend my time. And I have allowed unfair criticisms – such as the cliché and ludicrous, but often believed, idea that pastors only work a few hours a week and must have an easy life – to force me to justify myself through frenzied activities that have little to do with the ministry to which I am called.

I have come to realize that I cannot be trusted with my own calendar, but neither can I trust others with it. Only Christ has the knowledge and wisdom to guide my daily steps, and so I must surrender my calendar to him. I now pray about how I will spend my time each week, and I say “yes” or “no” to activities

accordingly. And, though I do not always hear God clearly through the noise of my life, I believe my schedule now reflects Kingdom values far more often than earthly ones.

This change of pace naturally impacts my productivity, at least according to the conventions of society. Allowing God to have full control over my calendar at times makes me appear lazy, because I say no to even good opportunities when they don't align with God's priorities for me or my church. At times, I appear selfish, because I give my best hours of the day to reading scripture, prayer, and writing. Sometimes, I appear a bit more aloof or distant, because I don't give everyone equal amounts of time and attention.

But the spiritual benefit of handing God my calendar and asking him to fill it with the things he wants for me has been tangible. This one single act has given me freedom from the fear of public opinion about my work, and has helped me to develop the fortitude to say no to spiritual distractions. It has also given me the space to begin doing things I should have been doing all along, but found myself incapable of. Things like Sabbath and evenings at home with my wife and children.

Surrendering my calendar has also given me space to begin reflecting deeply about the work of ministry, and which types of activities are the very best things I can spend my life doing. As a result, I have been reading widely about the need for [Deep Work](#), the healthy priorities of [Essentialism](#), the challenge of leading well in a culture that increasingly promotes [A Failure of Nerve](#) among its leaders, and how to establish healthy [Boundaries](#) that will ensure my own spiritual, emotional, and physical health, even as I encourage

these same things in those to whom I minister.

All of this has led me to the conclusion that productivity is not our problem. And while I am all for discovering and utilizing techniques and tools that will increase our ability to do our work well and in a timely fashion, and presumably free up more time for non-work pursuits, increasing our productivity will not heal the disease with which we have all been infected.

Our real problem isn't a lack of productivity. Our real problem – and I cannot stress enough that it is a spiritual problem – is busyness. And the only solution to this disease is surrendering our lives *completely* to the care of the Great Physician.

Our real problem isn't productivity; our real problem is that we aren't saying "yes" to God when and where it counts, because we are too busy saying "yes" to everyone and everything else.

If you are struggling with productivity or focus or margin in your life, I want to encourage you to consider that the problem might be a spiritual one.

Dream with me for a moment. What would your schedule look like if you could do anything you want with your time? Now, what do you think it would look like if you gave complete control of your calendar to Christ? Are there things you are doing that would embarrass you in a calendar review with Jesus? Are the

things you know he would want you to do that you don't currently, because you are too busy? Let me know your thoughts in the comment section below.