

Tyranny of the Urgent

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Have you ever wished for a thirty-hour day? Surely this extra time would relieve the tremendous pressure under which we live. Our lives leave a trail of unfinished tasks. Unanswered letters, unvisited friends, unread books haunt quiet moments when we stop to evaluate what we have accomplished. We desperately need relief.

But would that longer day really solve our problem? Wouldn't we soon be just as frustrated as we are now with our twenty-four-hour allotment? We could hardly escape Parkinson's Principle: Work expands to fill all the available time.

Nor will the passage of time necessarily help us catch up. Children grow in number and age to require more of our time. Greater experience in profession and church brings more demanding assignments. We find ourselves working more and enjoying it less.

Jumbled Priorities?

When we stop long enough to think about it, we realize that our dilemma goes deeper than shortage of time; it is basically a problem of priorities. Hard work doesn't hurt us. We all know what it is to go full speed for long hours, totally involved in an important task. The resulting weariness is matched by a sense of achievement and joy. Not hard work, but doubt and misgiving produce anxiety as we review a month or a year and become oppressed by the pile of unfinished tasks. We sense uneasily our failure to do what was really important. The winds of other people's demands, and our own inner compulsions, have driven us onto a reef of frustration. We confess, quite apart from our sins, "We have done those things which we ought not to have done, and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done."

An experienced factory manager once said to me, "Your greatest danger is letting the urgent things crowd out the important." He didn't realize how hard his advice hit. It has often returned to haunt and rebuke me by raising the critical problem of priorities.

We live in constant tension between the urgent and the important. The problem is that many important tasks need not be done today, or even this week. Extra hours of prayer and Bible study, a visit to an elderly friend, reading an important book: these activities can usually wait a while longer. But often urgent, though less important, tasks call for immediate response--endless demands pressure every waking hour.

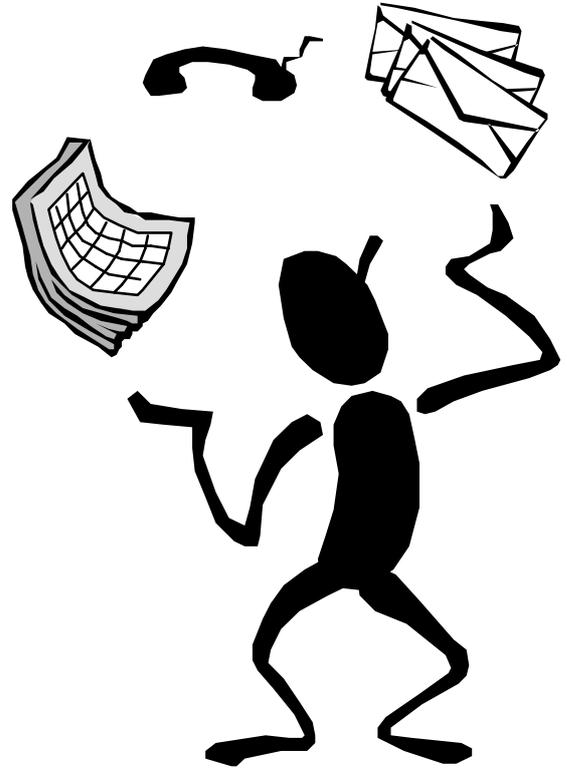
A person's home is no longer a castle, a private place away from urgent tasks. The telephone breaches its walls with incessant demands. The appeal of these demands seems irresistible, and they devour our energy. But in the light of eternity their momentary prominence fades. With a sense of loss we recall the important tasks that have been shunted aside. We realize that we've become slaves to the tyranny of the urgent.

Is there any escape from this pattern of living? The answer lies in the life of our Lord.

The Example of Jesus

On the night before he died, Jesus made an astonishing claim. In his great prayer of John 17 he said to his Father, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (v.4).

We wonder how Jesus could have talked about a completed work. His three-year ministry



seemed all too short. A prostitute at Simon's banquet had found forgiveness and a new life, but many others still plied their trade. For every ten withered muscles that had flexed into health, a hundred remained impotent. The blind, maimed and diseased abounded throughout the land. Yet on that last night, with many urgent human needs unmet and useful tasks undone, the Lord had peace. He knew that he had completed the work *God* had given him.

On many occasions Jesus declared that he did not come to carry out his own plans. "I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.... I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me . . . I always do what pleases him" (Jn 6:38; 8:28-29).

The Gospel records show that Jesus worked hard. After describing a busy day, Mark reports, "That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons" (Mk 1:32-34).

On another occasion the demands of the sick and maimed kept Jesus and his disciples so busy that they were not even able to eat. His family went to take charge of him, concluding that he was out of his mind (Mk 3:20-21). After yet another strenuous teaching session, Jesus and his disciples left the crowd and boarded a boat. "A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped." Through it all Jesus was sleeping in the stem on a cushion (Mk 4:35-38). What a picture of exhaustion!

Yet Jesus' life was never feverish; he had time for people. He could spend hours talking with one person, such as the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4). His life showed a wonderful balance, a sense of timing. On one occasion his brothers urged him to go to Judea. Jesus replied, "The right time for me has not yet come; for you any time is right" (Jn 7:6).

In *The Discipline and Culture of the Spiritual Life* A. E. Whiteham observes, "Here in this Man is adequate purpose . . . inward rest, that gives an air of leisure to His crowded life. Above all there is in this Man a secret and a power of dealing with the waste-products of life, the waste of pain, disappointment, enmity, death . . . making a short life of about thirty years, abruptly cut off, to be a 'finished' life. We cannot admire the poise and beauty of this human life, and then ignore the things that made it."

Wait for Instructions

What was the secret of Jesus' ministry? We discover a clue in Mark's report of what happened after the very busy day of teaching and healing which we first noted. "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed" (Mk 1:35). *He prayerfully waited for his Father's instructions.* Jesus had no divinely drawn blueprint or schedule; he discerned the Father's will day by day in a life of prayer. Because of this he was able to resist the urgent demands of others and do what was really important for his mission.

When Simon and his companions looked for Jesus and finally found him, they exclaimed, "Everyone is looking for you!" (v.37). The disciples had become embarrassed over their leader's delay. Didn't Jesus realize that back at the house people who had not yet been healed were crowding around the door asking for him?

Jesus' answer couldn't have been more shocking. "Let us go somewhere else-to the nearby villages-so I can preach there also. That is why I have come" (v.38). He then turned away from the waiting crowd and traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and driving out demons.

On another occasion Jesus faced a similar difficult choice between two worthwhile tasks. In the middle of a fruitful ministry across the Jordan where John the Baptist had preached, Jesus received an urgent message from his close friends Mary and Martha concerning their brother Lazarus: "Lord, the one you love is sick" (Jn 11:3). John records the Lord's paradoxical response: "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days" (vv. 5-6).

The urgent need was to prevent the death of the beloved brother. But the important thing from God's point of view was to raise Lazarus from the dead. So he was allowed to die and his sisters to grieve. Then Jesus traveled to Bethany and also wept with the family He raised Lazarus, having proclaimed: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies"

(v.25).

In both of these situations Jesus' yes to the Father's purpose meant saying no to urgent demands of human need. For the "man of sorrows, . . . familiar with suffering" (Is 53:3), those frequent decisions must have been extremely painful.

We may wonder why our Lord's ministry was so short, why it could not have lasted another five or ten years, why so many wretched sufferers were left in their misery. Since Scripture gives no answer to these questions, we must leave them within the mystery of God's purposes. But we do know that Jesus' prayerful waiting for the Father's instruction freed him from the tyranny of the urgent. It gave him a sense of direction, set a steady pace and at the end of his earthly ministry gave him the satisfaction that he had completed the work God had assigned him.

Dependence Makes You Free

Freedom from tyranny of the urgent is found not only in the example of our Lord but also in his promise. In a vigorous debate with the Pharisees in Jerusalem, Jesus said to those who believed in him, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free . . . I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin . . . If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn 8:31-32, 34, 36).

Many of us have experienced Christ's deliverance from the penalty and power of sin in our lives. Are we also letting him free us from the tyranny of the urgent? In this message he points the way: "If you hold to my teaching." This is the path to freedom, continuing day by day to meditate on the Scriptures and gain our Lord's perspective.

P. T. Forsyth once said, "The worst sin is prayerlessness." Does this statement surprise us? We usually think of murder and adultery as among the worst offenses against God and humanity. But the root of all sin is self-sufficiency-independence from the rule of God. When we fail to wait prayerfully for God's guidance and strength, we are saying with our actions, if not with our words, that we do not need him. How much of our service is actually a "going it alone"?

The opposite of such independence is prayer in which we acknowledge our need of God's guidance and empowerment. In this respect we have seen the example set by Jesus in the Gospels. He lived and served in complete dependence on his Father. Contrary to popular views, such dependence does not limit or repress human personality. We are never so fully personal-free to become our true selves-as when we are living in complete dependence on God.

Spending Time and Money

Unlike money time comes to all of us in equal amounts. In fact, everyone has all the time there is—twenty-four hours a day. But what an astonishing variety in our use of that time and the results of our choices! To a large extent this is due to wide differences in our talents, energy and opportunities. But in the last analysis, how we use our time depends on our goals. We make the hours count for what we think is important.

In some of his parables Jesus portrays life as a stewardship. He tells stories of stewards who are good or bad according to the way they manage their individual assets. Jesus says, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Lk 12:48). Paul writes, "It is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:2 RSV). And Peter instructs, "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Pet 4:10 RSV).

Before we consider basic principles in the stewardship of time, let us note a parallel between spending hours and dollars. Modern advertisers budget millions of dollars to persuade us that we have needs their products are designed to meet. And store managers have a canny knack for arranging items to attract our attention on the way in or out. As a result we sometimes impulsively spend money for products we don't really need and didn't intend to buy.

For me hardware stores have a strong attraction. I am fascinated by the variety of tools and gadgets. Suppose that today I need a new electric drill for an important home project and remember a special cash-and-carry price of \$17.90. I put \$20 in my wallet and head for the hardware store. But just inside the door I spot a set of five unusual screwdrivers on sale for \$3.95 and purchase them. Several counters

farther on a new kind of wrench catches my eye, and I spend another \$6.90. When at last I reach the electric drills, I discover that I no longer have enough money to buy what I came for.

If I had the honesty to return home and tell the family my sad story, how much sympathy would I get? What would they think of my excuse "I didn't have enough money for the drill"? At the moment the screwdrivers and wrench seemed important, but in the end they robbed me of the drill I really needed.

Many of us who resist spending our money this way are not equally careful with our time. We spend hours on the impulse of an unexpected opportunity or demand. Then we complain that our time flies away, leaving some important tasks unfinished. What is the remedy?

The following four steps will take us a long way toward more productive use of time: decide what's important, discover how time is now being spent, budget the hours and follow through.

Decide What's Important

When I say, "I don't have time for this project," I really mean, "I don't consider it as important as something else I want or need to do." For whatever reason, I have decided to use the hours another way—on a task I am pressured to do or on one that I enjoy. It may be planned or impulsive. Either way the issue is not simply lack of time but a choice I make.

The first step to regain control of time is to decide what activities are most important so that we can plan to give them the proper priority during a day or a week or a month. There is no blueprint for all Christians in the use of their time, any more than there is for spending money. God has given us different abilities, amounts of energy, opportunities, assignments and personal needs. So each of us should consider the basic components of a productive Christian life and prayerfully set specific goals. The following areas are interrelated and not necessarily listed in order of importance.

There is the dimension of personal relationships—with God, family, neighbors, friends. Ask yourself, Who are the important people in my life, and what claim do they have on my time? Another area is that of Christian fellowship, including activities of worship and service. Work makes constant demands on our time. And we may be involved with community duties and programs. We should also allow time for personal needs—hobbies, recreation, exercise or simply solitude.

Take time to write down a goal for each important activity and estimate the time it will take during the next several months. Reflect on the relative importance of these goals, but do not start making a schedule yet. This step simply identifies the most valuable activities in your life.

Discover Where Your Time Goes

When you tackle the problem of finances, you do not begin by making an ideal budget of how you *should* spend your money. You start by keeping track of where your dollars *are going* now. So it is with a time budget. Begin with an accounting of how you are currently spending your hours. This is essential because your pattern of spending time is a picture of your present lifestyle with its needs, values and desires. Any adjustments—some of which can be painful—must begin with facing this reality.

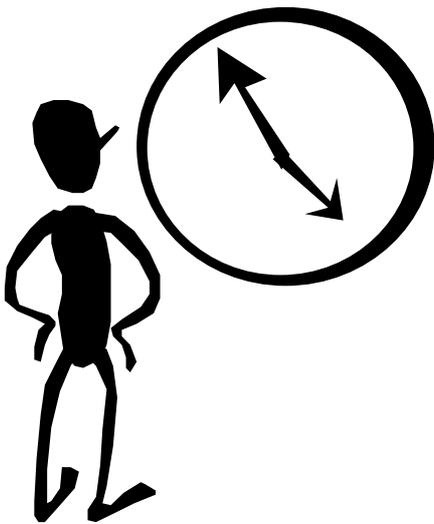
On one occasion I was talking to an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship chapter about the stewardship of time. I stressed the importance of taking a time inventory since our mental picture of how we spend the hours can be quite different from the way we *really* spend them. A month later one of the students, Paul, wrote me a letter. He honestly admitted that at the time my suggestion seemed quite unnecessary for *him*. He already knew how his time was being spent! But after a few days he decided to give it a try anyway. He was astonished at the result.

Paul usually played a "few minutes" of pool after dinner to relax before a heavy evening of engineering studies. He thought he was spending about half an hour a day. However, his inventory showed nine to ten hours a week! Paul could hardly believe it, but he couldn't evade the hard data. So he decided to keep tighter control of a recreation that was needed but that was taking far more time than necessary. In doing so he freed about six hours a week in his busy schedule to be spent on more important activities.

Even though you think you don't need this step, why not try it for a fairly typical week? Make a chart with the days across the top and the hours listed down the page in half-hour segments. (Shorter pe-

riods complicate the task; longer periods are not accurate enough.) Before you go to bed, be sure that each segment of that day is accounted for—whether it was used for meals, telephone, reading, church programs, shopping or whatever. If the evening was chopped up with telephone calls, for example, estimate the amount of time they took as well as the time you spent on other activities. (If you have a job with regular hours away from home, it is usually best to block out that period. Then you can prepare a separate time inventory to account for your hours at work and evaluate them accordingly.)

At the end of the week count the hours spent in each activity and compare the totals with the list of priorities you made in the first step. Then brace yourself for a shock. Most of us, like Paul, will discover significant gaps between our high-priority activities and how much time we are actually spending on them. There is an insidious tendency to neglect important tasks that do not have to be done today—or even this week.



Budget the Hours

Now you are ready to make some changes in the use of your time. A note of caution! Don't try to reorganize your life on paper and then hope to live the new schedule immediately. A small motorboat can suddenly turn 90 degrees without difficulty. But an ocean liner must turn slowly, just a few degrees at a time; otherwise it will come apart at the seams and sink. So start with the way you are using the hours *now* and plan only a few changes as they become possible for you.

First, get a large monthly calendar with enough room to enter the events of each day. Block out required activities such as job or class hours, commuting, shopping, etc. Consider one high-priority item for which more time needs to be budgeted. Then make the hard decision as to what activity must be cutback, if not eliminated, to free up those required extra hours.

You may want to follow the same procedure later with another important task that is not getting enough time. But remember: don't try to make too many changes at the outset. Your present ways of spending time reflect habits and satisfactions developed over the years, and some of them may be difficult to alter. Our Lord is a gracious teacher who helps us to learn one lesson at a time. The encouragement of small successes motivates us to stick with the budget.

For example, if you do not now have a daily quiet time of Bible reading and prayer, plan to set the alarm 15 to 20 minutes earlier. If you have trouble waking up, decide on an earlier time to retire. You may have to cut down on activities that keep you up late. In that case decide on one or two for dropping as soon as possible. (Of course, if you are simply not a "morning person," you will want to plan your quiet time at a different time during the day. In any case, you may have to eliminate another activity in order to fit this necessary one into your schedule.)

Finally, when you prepare your new schedule, remember to allow some uncommitted time each week. Just as dollars need to be set aside for emergencies, so hours should be reserved for unexpected demands.

Follow Through

Even the best-laid plans produce little without a firm resolve to implement them. At the outset of the day recommit yourself to the Lord as you think of the hours to follow. Take a few moments to list in order of priority the tasks to be done, taking into account commitments already made. A competent general always draws up his battle plan before engaging the enemy; he doesn't postpone basic decisions until the firing starts. But he is also prepared to change his plans if necessary to cope with an unexpected turn of events. So be ready to implement your plans as the day's battle against the clock begins.

Beware the tyranny of the telephone! From time to time an urgent call brings you a request for which you have no budgeted hours. The pleading voice assures you of the importance of this impending task and how well-qualified you are to take it on. It may be difficult to decline, especially if it seems that

the activity can be squeezed in. But no matter how clear the calendar looks, tell the person that you want to think it over. Surprisingly the engagement often appears less important after the pleading voice has become silent. If you withstand the urgency of the moment, you can weigh the cost and discern whether the task is God's will for you.

Look again at your time budget. If you accept this unexpected task, what scheduled activity must be curtailed or eliminated? It may well be that God wants you to accept the invitation, but not without first counting the cost. On the other hand, if you find that you cannot make room in your schedule for the task, you can decline the request without guilt. After the event you may ask, "How did it go?" Invariably you will hear, "Fine. We got someone else who did a great job!" Over many years I have never heard the answer "We are sorry that because you couldn't come we had to cancel our plans." I have come to realize that I am the indispensable person *only until the moment I say no*.

Don't be discouraged over failure to hold the line. Even the best-trained army sometimes loses a battle when things don't go according to plan. When your budgeting resolve breaks down, take courage, regroup and press forward with your overall strategy

Evaluate

People in business recognize the need to evaluate the present and plan for the future. Former President Greenwalt of DuPont said, "One minute spent in planning saves three or four minutes in execution." Many in sales have multiplied their profits by setting aside Friday afternoon to plan carefully the major activities of the coming week. Executives who are too busy to stop and plan may find themselves replaced by others who know better. Christians who are too busy to stop, take spiritual inventory and receive their assignments from God become slaves to the tyranny of the urgent. They may work day and night to achieve much that seems significant to themselves and others, but they don't complete the work God has for them to do.

In addition to your daily quiet time, set aside one hour a week for spiritual inventory. Jot down an evaluation of the past, record any lessons God may be teaching you, and plan your activities for the coming week. Also try to set aside a few hours each month for longer-range evaluation and planning. Often you may fail. Ironically, the busier we get, the more we need these periods—and the less we seem able to schedule them. We become like the fanatic who, unsure of his direction, doubles his speed.

Prayerful waiting on God is indispensable to effective service. Like the time-out in a basketball game, it enables us to catch our breath and reevaluate our strategy. In prayer we learn the truth about God, ourselves, and the tasks he wants us to undertake. The *need* itself, however urgent, is not the *call* for us to meet it; the call must come from the Lord who knows our limitations. "The LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (Ps 103:13-14). It is not God who loads us until we bend or break with an ulcer, heart attack or stroke. These largely come from our inner compulsions under the pressure of external demands.

Continue the Effort

There are two opposite ways to use our time. One person goes through the day responding mainly to inner compulsions and outward pressures of the moment. Another has a plan that sets priorities and prayerfully makes decisions in advance. Most of us live somewhere between these two extremes. But no matter where we are on the scale, progress is possible.

Over the years I have found that one of the greatest struggles in the Christian life is the effort to make adequate time for daily waiting on God, weekly inventory and monthly planning. Yet this is the path to escaping the tyranny of the urgent. As we hold to the teachings of Jesus and seek his wisdom in the decisions we make, he frees us from the tyranny of the urgent to do what is really important.

Nothing substitutes for knowing that on this day, at this hour, in this place, we are doing the will of our Father in heaven. Only then can we contemplate in peace so many unfinished tasks. At the end of our lives, whether they are short or long, what could give us greater joy than being sure that we have completed the work God gave us to do? Then we can look forward to seeing our Lord and hearing him say, 'well done, good and faithful servant!' (Mt 25:21).

Reflection and analysis:

1. Define the word *urgent* as used in as Hummel uses it in this article.
2. Define the word *important* as Hummel uses it in this article.
3. Consider the following excerpt from Stephen Covey's book *First Things First*. Covey & the Merrills, experts in the field of time management, criticize the presuppositions of many time management systems. Can their criticism be fairly applied to Hummel's article?

The primary paradigm of [time management] is one of control—plan it, schedule it, manage it. Take it a step at a time. Don't let anything fall through the cracks. Most of us feel it would be great to be “in control” of our lives. But the fact is, *we're* not in control; *principles* are. We can control our choices, but we cannot control the consequences of those choices. When we pick up one end of the stick, we pick up the other. To think we're in control is an illusion. It puts us in the position of trying to manage consequences. In addition, we can't control other people. And because the basic paradigm is one of control, time management essentially ignores the reality that most of our time is spent living and working with other people who cannot be controlled.

p 25-26, *First Things First*, Stephen Covey, Roger Merrill, Rebecca Merrill, 1994.

4. Inspired by Hummel, Covey and the Merrills created a time grid, labeled each of the resulting quadrants 1-4, and assigned a descriptive title to each one. They have also conducted research and determined the percentage of time spent in each category by typical organizations and individuals:

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	<p style="font-size: 2em;">II</p> <p>Crisis: 25-30%</p>	<p style="font-size: 2em;">III</p> <p>Quality: 15%</p>
Not Important	<p style="font-size: 2em;">IIII</p> <p>Deception: 50-60%</p>	<p style="font-size: 2em;">IV</p> <p>Waste: 2-3%</p>

5. Why do you think quadrant three is titled the quadrant of deception; conversely, why do you think quadrant two is labeled the quadrant of quality?
6. What are some activities that fit into each quadrant in your life?
7. How does your time break down into these quadrants?

Charles E. Hummel, former president of Barrington College in Rhode Island, recently retired as director of faculty ministries for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, U.S.A. His Bible study guide Priorities: Tyranny of the Urgent is a companion to this article. He has written two other booklets: Filled with the Spirit and The Prosperity Gospel. His books are The Galileo Connection: Resolving Conflicts Between Science and the Bible and Fire in the Fireplace: Charismatic Renewal in the Nineties. With his wife, Anne, he has written Genesis and Spiritual Gifts for the Life Guide® Bible Study series.