

## *Busy-Ness and Growth*

In C.J. Mahaney's book, *Living the Cross-Centered life*, he compares the busy-ness of our life to spinning plates. He discusses it in the contrast of legalism and grace. He discusses our motives and our attitudes; he addresses our understanding and the distinction between justification and sanctification. But he does not discuss what to do about the things which must still be done. Spinning plates doesn't stop, nor does C.J. suggest that we can put Bible study and prayer aside. But he does tell us that we mustn't let our busy-ness rule us, or steal our joy. That's easy enough to say, but as a practical matter, how do we prevent it? There are only 24 hours in a day, and there are many demands on our time. Even after we put the demands in priority order, and set aside the low priority stuff, juggling the remaining demands can still distract our focus from the cross – even if we're not legalists. So how do we attend to our necessary and urgent chores, without losing our focus on what's eternally important?

I encounter believers all the time who tell me how busy they are, and all the stress they have. They tell me how they want to “carve out a niche” in their daily schedule for Bible study and prayer. I suggest to them that our walk with Christ, which includes those disciplines of the faith, is not *in addition to* our other activities; rather, it takes place *within the context* of those activities. They don't have to carve out a niche. They have to invest their daily life with the truth of Scripture. Think of it as a series of concentric circles. God is at the center, our family in the next level, our work in the next level, our church in the next level, and everything else in the outer circle. The Christian walk begins with our own relationship with God at the center of it all. And that relationship then shines out into each successive level of our existence here on earth. It's not separate, but invasive. If that relationship is ignored, the light goes out in every successive circle. That's why the cross is at the center: that's where our relationship with God begins and ends, and where our life is infused with the light of God.

To over-state it, “*the Christian walk is concentric and holistic, not linear and compartmentalized*”. We begin our day with Bible study and prayer so that it pervades everything we're going to do that day. It isn't just a general attitude of giving glory to God in all things, as vital as that is. It is taking a single principle from Scripture in the portion we read in the morning, and either looking for ways to employ that principle all day long, or looking for ways in which it is evidenced to us in the things which God brings to us that day. We don't bless God's name and praise Him generally; we do it specifically. We don't just say, “God is Good” but we go on to catalog how God is good. We don't just say “God is Great” but we go on to list the works of His greatness. We don't just say “God is Truth” but we go on to articulate the detailed truth of the Gospel.

That's why our Bible reading and study is so crucial. It is very specific, done in small enough chunks that we can digest it, and then apply it right away – we *practice* our faith. We know that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. (Lk 10:27) And yet God listed how to specifically do that in the Ten Commandments. James tells us how to specifically demonstrate our faith. John's First Epistle tells us how to specifically love our brother, and *why*.

Those individual and discrete principles are the chisel; and if we actually apply them to the opportunities and circumstances of our day, they become the blows that shape us more and more into the image of

Christ. I've found for myself that if I don't *begin* my day with Bible reading and prayer, then nothing I do that day will give glory to God in a way that reshapes me. It's too general. It's like confessing, "God forgive me my sin" without ever examining my individual sins, and therefore without putting away specific sins; I don't think about them, or consider the effect each one has on others. I don't acknowledge my guilt for them, and so I fail to apply the blood of Christ to each one.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I look at His atonement as an all-purpose get-out-of-jail-free card, and my sin as a generalized condition. As a result, I'm tempted to resign myself to my ungodly behavior. You see, what happens when I fail to consider my individual sins is that the price Christ paid fails to constrain me; and the mercy I extend to others *because* of the cross is thereby diminished; I take a blanket approach to my Christian walk. I'm not thinking in specific terms, and so I tend to hide my conduct under vague generalities and truisms; nothing much changes.

If all I take is ten minutes in the morning to read a paragraph, extract a principle, and briefly pray about it, my whole day changes – glorifying God not only becomes possible, but inevitable – glory is not only given generally, but specifically. And what I gain is understanding and insight, because I have seen God's truth worked out in *practical* ways in real life. *Theory* becomes *experience*, and repeated experience becomes *wisdom* – all born of the truth of God lived out in the world. If I **don't** begin my day by extracting a biblical principle to live by that day, then what principle remains by default to govern my actions? I submit that Satan never sleeps, and he will employ my flesh to his best advantage. *The principle which remains is my own corruption.* I must begin each day intending to be led by God's Spirit, and not by the sinful desires of my flesh; that means consciously and intentionally seeking out the truth of God, ingesting it in a bite-sized kernel, and then choosing to allow that principle to govern my attitude and my actions that day.

And so I strive to go to the cross every morning for my instructions and my daily assignment. And in living out that day's assignment, I remain cross-centered no matter how many activities, or how much stress, or however tempting those distractions may be – so that God might receive the glory in all of it. I strive to do a review and personal assessment every night. What are the results of my efforts? Well, they're better than if I didn't begin my day at the cross... and that's motivation enough for me to continue the practice, and to stay the course. Sanctification is a cooperative venture; I have to do my part for the Spirit to be my Helper in it (John 14-16). Therefore, Christian growth is not a passive endeavor; we have to work at it (Phil 2:12; Isa 1:16-18); and we must do that daily (Lk 9:23; 11:3; Ps 68:19; Heb 3:13). *That's not legalism; it's living out the grace that has been given to us.*

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<sup>1</sup> I'm not suggesting that we catalog every sin for fear of missing one, thus leaving it unconfessed and uncovered by the blood of Christ. That's not only futile, it's bad doctrine. However, we don't sin generally; we sin specifically. Thus we need to hold up our daily conduct against the mirror of Scripture so that our sins may be revealed to us there. To the extent that we fail to go the mirror of God's Word, the persistent sinning we have in thought, word, and deed will remain hidden and ignored (Ps 119:9-12). If we ask God to help us, He will show us those sins that he wants us to deal with today (Ps 26:2). He'll dig deeper and wider as time goes on, so that He may root out our obvious sins first, and then move on to more subtle sins later. "Sanctify them with the truth. Your Word is truth." (Jn 17:17)