



TIME MANAGEMENT FOR PASTORS

Being a good minister when
you can't do everything

John Benton

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1. Why this is very important

Time management is a subject pastors need to take most seriously. Let's begin by seeing 4 reasons why this is the case.

First, if you don't get this right, it can be the cause of a great deal of personal stress. Inevitably, pastoring and preaching is a job with weekly deadlines. With a large slice of the work you cannot let it 'roll over' until next week. There is bound to be some pressure. We need to know how to manage our time so we do a good job.

Second, very often there is no job description given by the church for the work of a pastor. So you could always do more – and many sincere pastors with tender consciences don't know when to stop. This is the road to burn out. Some pastors try to get round this by insisting on an exact job description and knowing precisely what is required of them. But that way of handling things tends to destroy the 'family' feel of a church and invites the elders or the church to see you simply as 'someone we employ' rather than a brother, a friend, a member of the body of Christ and a father in the faith.

Third, if we don't handle our time well, it will impact our family – especially our children. Perhaps they are out at school all day – very often you have to be out in the evening. You are on the go all day Sunday. And if you don't get this right, you will be missing on Saturday – still in the study, frantic about producing your sermons for the next day. Your children can feel neglected by you. It can be a disaster. And if your family is a mess, you are in no fit state to be in church leadership, 1 Timothy 3.4,5.

Fourth, if you get this wrong and you are always under stress, you will not enjoy the ministry and that will come across, and that won't be good for the church, Hebrews 13.17c.

Time-management is therefore something we have to conquer as men in the ministry. And it is arguable that the smaller the church, the more you have to be good at it. In a little fellowship there are fewer people to do things and so more jobs tend to fall to you than would be the case in a bigger church.

2. Routines and priorities

In order to get a Biblical handle on time management, let us go back to the beginning of time. It makes sense to notice how God set things up in Genesis 1.1 through to 2.4. [Exercise: It might be useful if you read through that passage.]

And, of course, the explanation of the 4th commandment concerning the day of rest in Exodus 20 connects creation to our pattern for working life – not just for pastors but, we would have to say, including pastors.

Here are four initial observations from Genesis 1 and 2.

In many ways these are obvious. But sometimes we overlook the obvious to our peril.

First, when he created the world, God ordered our time with built in rhythms and routines. Our understanding of the solar system elucidates this for us. No doubt the Lord could have made planet earth floating free in space, attached to nothing. That would have meant that no one would ever be sure when the planet might float into light and day would dawn. It would all have been quite random. But instead, he structured our time. He set up planet earth within the solar system orbiting the sun and with our own moon and axial rotation, ensuring a repetition of night and day, months and years, Genesis 1.14. We have to say this is how God ordered things for us. Genesis 1 has a very definite structure which indicates that God was preparing the world for us. What is the implication? It is that God intended us to be basically creatures of habit.

Second, through his own creation week, God enacts the week as the pattern for our own working week, Exodus 20.9-11. We have, therefore, weeks and days and nights for patterns of work and rest built into the very fabric of the world. We need to welcome and harness these God-given rhythms and learn from them – not kick against them, not to be disorganized and think that's 'spiritual'.

Third, God put us in charge. He made us in his image and gave us a task of bringing the earth to fruition – kind of pastors of creation. He made us responsible beings, with imagination, conscience and independent choice, accountable to him – sub-creators under the Great Creator. We are in charge of our time. We must choose how to use it. Perhaps you have come into ministry from a job where your manager set your priorities and you were told what to do. Perhaps you are just not used to having so much freedom to set your own agenda for the day and are tempted to misuse that freedom. Don't.

God put us in charge and especially God put us in charge of ourselves. Here's the big lesson: **The key to time management is managing ourselves – self-discipline** (cf. Galatians 5.21).

Fourth, to proceed in ordering our time, a crucial step is to ask the question 'what is my over-arching priority?' It is vital that we are clear in our minds about our main task.

To Adam, God gave a job to do. He said, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...' Genesis 1.28. Our work as pastors can be seen as being under that same umbrella. There is a direct line between this cultural mandate of Genesis 1.28 and the great commission of Matthew 28.18-20 – it is all about bringing the world to fruition under Christ's Lordship. Christ is the true Adam, who fills all things in every way, Ephesians 1.23. Simply speaking, whereas Adam and Eve were to fill the earth with their offspring, Christ and the church fill the world with his children – and the Lord Jesus uses people like us – pastors and preachers – to do that. Through the seed of the word of God, people are born again into God's family.

Now this gives us the principled focus of what we are about. We make choices about using our time – with this overarching priority in mind.

What is that principled priority? It is the conversion of people to Christ and the well-being of God's people, to his glory. Our work, under God and for God, is therefore people-focused. Preaching is not an end in itself. It is for the good of the people of God. The apostle Paul presents us with this same **principled priority** as he tells the Ephesian elders what they are to be about. 'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,' Acts 20.28. We are shepherds – who feed and heal and lead the flock that belongs to our master. Again the great pastoral call of the Lord Jesus to Peter reiterates the same priority, 'Feed my lambs / Take care of my sheep', John 21.15, 16, 17.

So, as we begin to formulate how we are going to use our time, we have to think of disciplining ourselves into habits of work which build up God's people. We need to organize ourselves into routines around executing that **principled priority**.

Next, we must take on board the disruption of Genesis 3

With the coming of human sin in Genesis 3, the perfect world becomes a world in crisis. The smooth running of the world is interrupted. Time becomes limited – not least by death. To Adam, God says: ‘Dust you are and to dust you shall return,’ Genesis 3.19c. Work becomes tiring and painful instead of joyful. So naturally as fallen people, we tend to shy away from work, Proverbs 6.6-8. Our mental abilities are affected by sin. Our hearts become foolish and darkened. This can go two ways. It can mean we are filled either with fear, which tells us we don’t have the ability to do various things. On the other hand it can mean we are filled with pride which leads us into thinking we can do everything and achieve far more than we are actually capable of (often for our own egos!).

With this in mind, *first* note that we live in a fallen creation and so in our present world Perfectionism (to which many pastors and preachers are prone) is a heresy, a time-waster, and can be a swift route to burn out and disaster in ministry! There is no perfection in this world. We are not to be perfectionists, but to ‘do our best and commit the rest’ (to God).

Second, the Fall can tend to make us work-shy. It can make us continually procrastinate our less palatable duties. Let me put it like this: ‘The successful pastor has the habit of doing things which other pastors don’t like doing. He doesn’t like doing them either necessarily. But his dislikes are subordinated to his strength of purpose.’ (this is adapted from Steven Covey – *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*). We are back to the need for self-discipline here.

[Exercise: spend a moment to think and then write down the 3 things you neglect or least like doing which are necessary for the work of pastoral ministry.]

3. Thinking through what you do

So with all this in mind, many find the ‘Time Management Matrix’ helpful. This is a well-known tool often used in the business world but is worth applying to our lives. It gets us to think through our work in terms of what is urgent and what is important. The dictionary defines ‘urgent’ as that which calls for immediate action – it’s about time. Slightly differently, ‘important’ concerns that which is of great consequence or significance, but may not have the same time-constraint.

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	I - <i>Activities</i> Crises Pressing problems Deadline-driven projects	II – <i>Activities</i> Prevention, Principled Priorities Relationship building Seeing new opportunities Planning / recreation
Not important	III – <i>Activities</i> Interruptions / some calls Some mail, some meetings Other people’s priorities Popular activities	IV – <i>Activities</i> Trivia, looking busy Some calls Time wasters Pleasant activities

Urgent matters are usually visible – they insist on action. They are often popular with other people. But you do need to discern between the urgent and the important – don’t give in to the ‘tyranny of the urgent.’ King Saul fell into this trap in 1 Samuel 13.11, 12.

Important matters on the other hand are to do with our God-given overarching goals / our **principled priority**. They contribute to your primary calling, so, e.g., what does Jesus see as important over against the urgent clamour of the crowd and popularity, Mark 1.35-39?

Now let’s look at the four quadrants of the matrix.

Quadrant I is both urgent and important

It deals with significant things which require immediate attention – crises, problems. These have to be dealt with – but we must not let this quadrant dominate us. If you do, it will lead to stress and maybe burn-out. Or, if it dominates you, it will lead you to opt out – waste a lot of time in Quadrant IV just to find escape. With this in mind, you need to limit how many extra

deadline-driven projects you take on. You already have the deadline of Sunday preaching. There will be crises in people's lives which need urgent attention. And you must give that attention. But if the church is keen – for example – to put on a fun-day for the community in the park (excellent idea) – but you know that in the end it is all going to fall on your shoulders (you and your wife) – say 'No'. (We need to learn how to explain why we are saying 'No' in such situations and to do that in a kindly fashion). If we are too much given to pleasing people (rather than God) we are likely to find ourselves marooned in Quadrant I, Proverbs 29.25.

Quadrant III is urgent but not important

If you are spending a lot of time in Quadrant III it indicates that you are out of control. You are just being swept along by the latest 'crisis' – which actually isn't a crisis at all – because it's unimportant. You live your life by being reactive rather than pro-active. You will always have a short-term focus. You may well feel wrongly overworked and victimized – but that is due to your failure to take control.

Quadrant IV is not urgent and it's not important

If you are spending a lot of your time in Quadrant IV you are simply being irresponsible. You are wasting the church's time and money on your salary. You are playing games – perhaps literally, on the computer, Ephesians 5.15, 16.

Quadrant II is important but not urgent

Having worked through the other quadrants, you can see that, in fact, Quadrant II is the heart of effectively managing your time and managing yourself. It deals with things that are not urgent but are important. For us who are in ministry it is about prayer, it is about Bible meditation, it is about thinking and praying and planning, it is about building pastoral relationships – so that when a crisis arises in that person's life they know that you are a friend who is trying to help them. You can't spend all of your time in this quadrant (truly urgent things do need attending to) – but the trick is to defend that quadrant so that it is where you spend a substantial part of your week. It will mean learning to say 'No' to some things in a kind and pastoral way. But spending time here will result in having a clear vision for the church, a balance in outlook, a proper discipline.

Planning our week

So how do we move ahead with this and try to make a timetable that is workable? Let me just say that planning is a good idea. God works according to plans. Before the beginning of time he planned what would happen in time.

He planned our salvation. God has a timetable for the world which culminates in the Return of Christ, Mark 13.32. Made in his image we too should plan. We should plan thoughtfully and prayerfully. I know plans can go awry – but it is still worth doing.

Note again – the God-given unit of work is the week We get this from the creation week. It is a pattern for us. So primarily we should think in terms of planning for a week's work. We do this by way of setting up routines. If we can first set up a basic routine or template for our usual week then, of course, we can work variations on a theme as different things are due to come up on particular weeks. But if we don't have that basic routine we are likely to get washed away in the tide of events. There is, of course, room for planning beyond a week – long term preaching series or whatever – dates and requirements for evangelistic outreaches through the year etc. But beware – we do need room for some spontaneity and the leading of the Spirit (Cf. Acts 8.26, 29) – otherwise a church becomes a little like a machine, not a body.

A church member once asked his pastor about the vision for the church. The pastor replied by referring the church member to the programme of events. But a vision is not a treadmill.

As we try to plan a week, it is helpful to think in terms of 5 things: listing, selecting, understanding, scheduling and adapting.

- Listing

First of all make a list of all your responsibilities – not just as a pastor, but as a husband, father, friend, human being. Here is an example. [Exercise: you may be able to improve on this.]

Individual

Husband

Father

Pastoral care

Pastoral prayer

Pastoral teaching

Administration

Leadership team

- Selecting

Think of 2 or 3 results you would like to accomplish this week in each category. At least some of them should be Quadrant II activities. Again here is my example:

Individual – time with God, recreation, reading

Husband – spend relaxed time with my wife, fix garden shed,

Father – spend time with children on Saturday, at least one bed-time prayers with each.

Pastoral care – visit 3 people /families

Pastoral prayer – some of members list, Sunday and needy individuals, church future

Pastoral preaching – Sunday sermons, midweek.

Administration – agenda for church meeting, kitchen health inspector

Leadership team – minutes and agenda for elders’ meeting, elders’ meeting.

- Understanding

As we make a schedule, we need to understand ourselves. For example, some men can’t stand being last minute – they have to have their sermons prepared at least a week in advance. Others cannot handle that – to them sermons prepared over a week beforehand makes them feel as if they are serving up a cold dinner to their congregation. We need to understand that we are not all the same. We need to understand ourselves.

But it is worth checking on yourself. Have you taken on habits of time wasting, say, from a student lifestyle which you now need to ditch? Do you need to go to bed earlier and buy an alarm clock?

- Scheduling

Now look at the week ahead with your goals in mind and schedule time in for them. These times have to be realistic, but containable.

The most important is your individual time with God. We will come back to this. But this matter feeds into all the others. Probably it should be in the early morning – at least half an hour. Isaiah 40.31 tells us that those who wait on the Lord renew their strength. (Also see Psalm 27.13, 14; Acts 13.1-3). The early morning is often the time when there are the least interruptions.

Preparation time for messages should usually be in the mornings – when we are fresh and hopefully can think more clearly.

Pastoral meetings should not be open ended. Allocate 1 hour, 2 at most. If meetings drag on too long you will become tired and your helpfulness will

decline. It can be good to give those you are seeing a start time and an end time. Do it graciously.

Having identified roles and set goals, you can now allocate each goal to a certain time in the week.

It may be unrealistic to require two whole days off a week – that is modern society – not the Bible which gives one day in 7. You might want to split half-day Saturday with children and half day Monday for personal rest?

Monday is a good time for rest, since you will have seen folk at church on Sunday and therefore it is unlikely that they really need to see you again the next day.

However, this is a personal consideration. Others like to pick up on things on Monday which they became aware of on Sunday and rest later in the week.

Again it's a matter of knowing yourself.

- Adapting

Your schedule is bound to drift somewhat. So there is a need to adapt on a daily basis. So take a few moments each morning when you sit down at your desk to review where you are up to – and what is reasonable. The main thing is not to prioritize things which do not relate to the principled goals of your job as a pastor.

There will be times, of course, when your whole schedule has to go out of the window – but only allow that to happen on a principled basis – with your overarching priority in mind.

Even Almighty God let his normal routine of working go out of the window as he saw his people were in need of winning a crucial battle, Joshua 10.13, 14. He stopped the sun in the sky. So don't beat yourself up too much if the schedule goes astray. Think people before 'efficiency'.

4. Distractions?

This is a big problem for some pastors and can fall into the category of the urgent pushing out the important. In our digital age, possibilities for distraction by social media and the phone have multiplied. You must learn to manage these. The reason I say this especially with respect to sermon preparation is this. Proper sermon preparation requires immersing ourselves in the task. There needs to be an intense and prayerful concentration on the word of God. If we are often distracted it will hinder our concentration more than we perhaps realize.

Research shows that if someone is working at something with intense concentration, when that concentration is broken, it can take up to 20 minutes for the worker to regain the same intensity of concentration. If you want a more thorough analysis concerning the way distraction undermines fruitful concentration, it is worth reading through the 2016 book *Deep Work* by Cal Newport, published by Piatkus.

What are the main sources of distraction for pastors?

Phone calls:

These especially need to be managed. Just imagine if you are deep in sermon preparation and you are distracted by a phone call, then perhaps that might take anywhere between 5 minutes and half an hour plus the time to regain concentration. If you take, say, two such phone calls in a morning you are getting towards probably a whole hour being taken out of your preparation time. If you decide that mornings are the time to prepare sermons explain this to the church. Say 'please, phone calls are best afternoons and evenings' and then turn your mobile phone to 'Flight Mode' or the equivalent for the morning. If something terribly urgent occurs in a morning (which is very unlikely), encourage people to phone one of the other elders or your wife. Make sure you set the example by only making your own phone calls in the evening.

Emails and texts:

These need to be managed.

- Number 1 – by setting yourself two short periods a day when you look at them but otherwise ignoring them. So if you work in the morning 9am until 12.30pm, set 12.10pm to 12.30pm to deal with texts and emails – and then 4.30 – 5.00pm.

- Number 2 – again set the example by only ever sending short texts or emails. Explain that you would rather someone talks to you face to face than receive a long email. Long emails are likely not to be read. People from church see you twice on a Sunday, once mid-week at least and if there are major matters to be discussed it is best done face to face, 2 John v12.
- Number 3 – think through a ‘triage’ for emails (a way of assessing them) when you first look at them: a). Those that are not worth it – ignore or delete, b). Those you can answer immediately – do so, c). Those that are going to need thought and the collection of information to reply to, flag up and make a note of and get them done at the later period you’ve set aside for emails.

Stick to this pattern. Don’t deviate from it – even if it comes from some evangelical superstar ‘John Piper wants me to speak at the next Gospel Coalition in the US!’

Some people recommend ‘inbox zero’ – empty inbox before evening. Some recommend ‘inbox infinity’ – don’t feel bound to deal with everything – just leave it. Whichever way suits you will be okay. Make sure you do your utmost to manage distractions.

5. Driven-ness

We should all want our churches to be successful. The proper motives for this are, of course, love for the lost, the well-being of the Lord's people and the glory of God. But pride can sneak in and turn that right goal into an idol – something which actually serves us and our reputations rather than the Lord Jesus Christ. We become driven people. This can be another road to burn-out.

What are the symptoms of being in the grip of the 'idol of the successful church'? Here are some suggestions.

1. Quantity over quality

The church becomes more concerned about numbers attending than the care of the people. Paul implies in 1 Corinthians 13 that you can have a church as big as you like, but without love it is a total zero in God's sight.

2. Image over substance

A pastor in the grip of the idol of success needs to look good. He tends to prioritize being shiny, slick and visible. The outer matters more than the inner, the image more than the heart. We are led to become kind of modern day Pharisees without even realizing it, Matthew 23.25, 26.

3. Time is warped

The driven pastor will give everything to make his church successful while neglecting other vital areas of his life – like his family.

4. Finance rules

Money can achieve things; there is no doubt about that. Therefore a driven pastor is often concerned about raising finance. But finance cannot bring the work of the Spirit, Acts 8.18-20.

5. Driven rather than deep

A pastor who is in the grip of the idol of the successful church will be a driven man rather than a deep man. The secret place of prayer gets neglected.

6. Youth over age

Targeting young people is often defended in terms of raising up the church of the future. Yes – that makes sense. But it can become an excuse for neglect of the less than 'hipster' work of seeking the salvation of those near the end of life.

I fear that many churches thirst for students in a way they don't thirst for God himself.

7. CEOs not shepherds

My reading of the NT is that, although elders have responsibility before God for everything in the church, their primary concern should be to be shepherds of God's flock, 1 Peter 5.2. The diaconate emerges in a larger church in order to relieve the elders so that they will not be distracted from caring for people, from prayer and from ministering God's word in various ways. But in the church which is jealous for 'success', it often seems that elders have 'bigger fish to fry' than visiting the flock and getting alongside people.

If we are not careful, we become pastors and churches that try too hard. There is little sense of rest and simply enjoying the Lord. Our Saviour is not a slave-driver – but ego is!

6. Delegation

In Scripture, we find that busy church leaders were helped also by being able to share / delegate some of the work with others.

Adam and Eve can be seen as sharing the work God had given them, Genesis 1.28. Their children took on the work too, Genesis 4.2.

The most famous example of delegation is perhaps Moses, who takes the advice of his father-in-law, Exodus 18.13-26 – notice in particular v17.

We find the Lord Jesus does the same thing, Luke 9.1,2; 10.1. He sends others to sort out the room for eating the Passover, for example, Matthew 26.17f.

The apostles delegate the work of looking after the daily distribution of food in the early church, Acts 6.1f. It seems here is the origin of the diaconate in the church.

And the apostle Paul, uses others, e.g., Titus 1.4; 1 Timothy 3.14, 15; 1 Thessalonians 3.1,2.

It is not a sign of weakness to ask the help of others.

Also, of course, the whole picture of the local church being the ‘body of Christ’ – has the same idea of a shared work. Different folk have different gifts and do different things. They are a body or a team which works together for the good of all, 1 Corinthians 12.

Notice this is the whole church. We must be careful of the professionalization of a ‘staff team’ which does everything and turns church members into mere spiritual ‘consumers.’ This undermines the NT themes of the local church as a family and a body.

We need to teach our people concerning the ‘every member ministry’ nature of the church in order for them to be up for this, Romans 12.3f etc. They may have been brought up on a ‘pastor and deacons do everything’ philosophy which you will need to gently prize them away from.

Two kinds of delegation

You need wisdom in who you ask to do things. A blanket asking for volunteers can result in having to deal with the most unsuitable candidates. But don’t think that you are the only person who can do a good job. Perhaps you would do the job better – but if the job is done satisfactorily – that will do.

There is a good way to delegate and a bad way to delegate.

- Bad delegation – is using the person as an automaton – ‘do exactly as I tell you.’ This reduces the person to a machine. You dictate the exact method from which there must be no deviation. The implied message is that you have no trust in the person. It is likely to lead to problems in the relationship.
- Good delegation – is, having selected a person in whom you have some confidence, to say ‘here’s the job, I can explain how to do it if you like, but you get it done the best way you think – so long as it gets done.’ The message here is – ‘I trust you.’

For busy pastors – you should also use other people’s help with sermons. John Stott had a couple of young people who would do research for him for his books and his messages etc. My best researcher is rather older – his name is Matthew Henry! We can’t always produce 3 messages from scratch each week. We need help. We might need to sit at the feet of the masters of exposition. And one way to learn to preach is to copy the masters, just as renaissance art students learned to paint by copying, for example, a Rembrandt. You are not always called to be original in your ministry but you are called to be helpful to people.

7. The big 'well done'

It is good to keep in mind the fact that we must give an account to God at the end of our lives. But if we have used our time well we do not need to fear this.

In particular, time spent with God himself will not be seen as wasted on that day. How could it? In a world in which the pace of life seems to be increasing constantly, it is especially good to bear in mind the need to take time with the things which really matter. Here are some wise words from the Puritan Thomas Brooks:

'Remember, it is not hasty reading, but serious meditating upon holy and heavenly truths, that make them prove sweet and profitable to the soul. It is not the bee's touching of the flower that gathers honey, but her abiding for a time upon the flower that draws out the sweet. It is not he who reads most, but he that meditates most, that will prove the choicest, sweetest, wisest and strongest Christian.'

Your church needs you as the pastor to be strong as a Christian. And as you are strong, you will be able to make the most of your time for the kingdom of God. Such ministries will produce fruit and receive the greatest accolade from Christ himself: 'Well done good and faithful servant...Come and share in your master's happiness,' Matthew 25.21.

'Be on your guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: Watch!' Mark 13.33-37.

