

# Tyranny of the Urgent

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, unwritten articles and unread books haunt quiet moments when we stop to evaluate. We desperately need relief.

But would a thirty-hour day really solve the problem? Wouldn't we soon be just as frustrated as we are now with our twenty-four hour allotment? A mother's work is never finished, and neither is that of any student, teacher, minister, or anyone else we know. Nor will the passage of time help us catch up. Children grow in number and age to require more of our time. Greater experience in profession and church brings more exacting assignments. So we find ourselves working more and enjoying it less.

## Jumbled Priorities?

Our problem is basically not one of time but of priorities. Hard work does not 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. 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 that we may have failed to do the important.

Several years ago, an experienced manager said to me, 'Your greatest danger is letting the urgent things crowd out the important'. He didn't realise how hard his maxim hit.

We live in constant tension between the urgent and the important. The problem is that the important task rarely must be done today or even this week. Extra hours of prayer and Bible study, a visit to that non-Christian friend, careful study of an important book: these projects can wait. But the urgent tasks call for instant action – endless demands pressure every hour and day.

## Can You Escape?

Is there any escape from this pattern of living? The answer lies in the life of our Lord. On the night before he died, in the great prayer of John 17, Jesus spoke of having completed the work God gave him to do (verse 4).

How could Jesus consider his work 'completed'? 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 walked the street unchanged. For every withered muscle that had flexed into health, a hundred remained impotent. Yet on that last night, with many useful tasks undone and urgent human needs unmet, the Lord had peace; he knew he had finished God's work.

Jesus worked hard. After describing a busy day Mark writes, *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.* (Mark 1:32-34). On another occasion, the demands of the ill and maimed caused him to miss supper and to work so late that his family thought he was beside himself (Mark 3:21).

Yet his life was never feverish; he had time for people. His life showed a wonderful balance, a sense of timing. Jesus did not ruin his gifts by haste.

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## Wait For Instructions

What was the secret of Jesus' work? We find a clue in Mark's observation that: *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* (Mark 1:35). He prayerfully waited for his Father's instructions and for the strength to follow them. Jesus had no divinely drawn blueprint; he discerned the Father's will day by day in a life of prayer. By this means he warded off the urgent and accomplished the important.

Lazarus' death illustrates this principle. What could have been more important than the urgent message from Mary and Martha, *Lord, the one you love is sick* (John 11:3)? John records the Lord's response in these paradoxical words: *Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days* (verses 5-6). The urgent need was to prevent the death of this beloved brother. But the important thing from God's point of view was to raise Lazarus from the dead. So Lazarus was allowed to die. Later Jesus revived him as a sign of his magnificent claim, *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies* (verse 25).

## Dependence Makes You Free

At the end of 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...So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.* (John 8:31-36)

Many of us have experienced Christ's deliverance from the penalty of sin. Are we letting him free us from the tyranny of the urgent? He points the way; *If you hold to my teaching.* This is the way to freedom. Through prayerful meditation on God's word we gain his perspective.

It has been said, 'The worst sin is prayerlessness'. We usually think of murder, adultery or theft as among the worst. But the root of all sin is self-sufficiency, independence from God. When we fail to wait prayerfully for God's guidance and strength, we are saying, with our actions if not with our lips, that we do not need him.

Prayerful waiting on God is indispensable to effective service. The Lord shows us the truth about himself, ourselves and our tasks. He impresses on our minds the assignments he wants us to undertake. The need is not the call; the call must come from the God who knows our limitations: *As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust* (Psalm 103:13-14). It is not God who loads us until we bend or crack with an ulcer, nervous breakdown, heart attack or stroke. It is our inner compulsions with the pressure of circumstances.

## Evaluate

The modern businessman recognizes this principle of taking time out for evaluation. When Greenwalt was president of Du Pont, he said, 'One minute spent in planning saves three or four minutes in execution'. Many salesmen have revolutionized their business and multiplied their profits by setting aside Friday afternoon to plan carefully the major activities of the coming week. If the Christian is too busy to stop, take spiritual inventory and receive his assignments from God, he becomes a slave to the tyranny of the urgent. He may work day and night to achieve much that seems significant to himself and others, but he will not finish the work God has for him to do.

A quiet time of meditation and prayer at the start of the day refocuses our relationship with God.

Recommit yourself to his will as you think of the hours that follow. In these unhurried moments list in order of priority the tasks to be done, taking into account commitments already made. Then try to implement the plans you have made, but be open to any emergency interruption or unexpected person who may call.

You may find it necessary to resist the temptation to accept an engagement when the invitation first comes over the telephone. No matter how clear the calendar may look, ask for a day or two to pray for guidance before committing yourself. Surprisingly, the engagement often appears less imperative after the pleading voice has become silent. If you can withstand the urgency of the initial moment, you will be in a better position to weigh the cost and discern whether the task is God's will for you.

In addition to your daily quiet time, set aside one hour a week for spiritual reflection. Write an evaluation of the past, record anything God may be teaching you and plan objectives for the future. Also try to reserve most of one day each month for reflection over a longer range. Often you will fail. Ironically, the busier you get the more you need this time of assessment, but the less you seem able to take it. Frenetic service for God can become an escape from God, but when you prayerfully take stock and plan your days, it provides fresh perspective on your work.

## Continue The Effort

Since this time for receiving 'marching orders' is so important, Satan will do everything he can to squeeze it out. Yet we know from experience that only by this means can we escape the tyranny of the urgent. Nothing substitutes for knowing that on this day, at this hour, in this place we are doing the will of the Father. Then and only then can we think of all the other unfinished tasks with equanimity and leave them to God. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ makes this fulfilment possible. The way is clear. If we hold to the teaching of our Lord, we are truly his disciples and he will free us from the tyranny of the urgent, free us to do the important, which is the will of God.

Charles Hummel

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Taken from The 2:7 Series,  
Adapted from Tyranny of the Urgent by Charles E Hummel.  
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