

Is Being Busy a Virtue or a Vice?

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“How are things going for you, pastor?”

“Doing great! I have been crazy busy lately. We have quite a bit going on with it being around the holidays. Busy. Busy. Busy.”

The parishioner has a bit of concern for the pastor, hoping he doesn’t burn out. But she is also encouraged that her pastor has such a great work ethic and isn’t a lazy bum like some other pastors that she hears about. Good that he’s keeping busy with kingdom work. Better to burn out than rust out, right?

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“How are things going for you, pastor?”

“Doing great! I’m not busy at the moment. In fact, I can’t think of the last time that I’ve really felt busy or overworked. I have finished most of my work for the week and I’m going to spend some time taking a nature hike today.”

Is the parishioner encouraged by this response?

What Is the Definition of Sloth?



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When you hear the word “sloth,” what do you think of? I think of the animal first, but after some more reflection I tend to think of a dude with a remote control in one hand, mustard stains on his tank top, about a hundred pounds overweight, watching Judge Judy while his wife is out working two jobs to pay the bills. He could work, he just chooses not to.

What if I told you there is another image of sloth – the grasshopper. In Aesop’s fable of *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, the grasshopper is busy. He’s busy making music all day, every day. His entire summer is taken up with playing the fiddle and he doesn’t store up an ounce of food. Meanwhile, the ant was wisely working to store up food. The grasshopper has to beg the ants for food. The moral of the story is “there’s a time for work and a time for play.”

There is another older word that is often teamed with sloth. Acedia. Acedia means a lack of care or concern. Yes, it might look a bit like what we would term depression, but it’s a bit different. It’s to not care about the task at hand, to assume that time is our own. There is a restlessness to acedia. See how John Cassian describes it:

“He looks about anxiously this way and that, and sighs that none of the brethren come to see him, and often goes in and out of his cell, and frequently gazes up at the sun, as if it was too slow in setting, and so a kind of unreasonable confusion of mind takes possession of him like some foul darkness.”

Sloth, then, isn’t simply about being a lazy bum who sleeps the day away. There can be a restlessness to sloth as well. Here is how I’ve explained it previously:

“You see the heart of the sluggard is that he is trying to find *rest* the wrong way. That’s why you can replace ‘sleep’ with any event...even Bible Study. If I *should* be mowing my yard but I let it grow up into a jungle because I’m too busy with studying my Bible, then I’m not being spiritual, I’m being a sluggard. That’s not to say there might not be some seasons which call for high grass and long hours in the Scriptures. But certain seasons call for certain actions, and if I avoid the proper one and replace it with something more

pleasurable then, I'm being a sluggard. I'm trying to find rest in a thing instead of in what God desires for me in a particular moment."

This means that you can be dreadfully busy and engaging in slothfulness at the same time. Busyness, by itself, is not a virtue. The key is to ask what a particular moment calls for.

Why Do We Think Busyness Is a Virtue?



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I read somewhere that as a man who had immigrated to the United States was attempting to learn the language, he thought the word "busy" meant "good." Why did he make this connection? Because the people he encountered answered "How are you?" by saying, "busy." We wear busyness like a badge of honor. Why?

First, we rightly believe that "idle hands are the devil's tools." But we've embraced this to a fault, as if just doing *something, anything*, is a noble endeavor. In our culture we have turned busyness into an unanalyzed virtue. And when everyone around us is busy, we can feel like a lazy schmuck if we aren't joining in the frenetic pace.

But Tony Crabbe is correct. Busy is actually easier than focused attention. It's easier than picking the right thing and focusing upon that task. This is how he says it:

"Busy is the easy option. We are busy because we don't make the tough choices. We allow the world and our inbox to set our agenda, rather than think for ourselves. It's easier to simply react; to choose to try to do everything, rather than make the difficult decisions and unchoose things — it takes more courage to do less."

Secondly, we think busyness is a virtue because we don't know any other way. Busyness is the air we breathe. We have negative feelings when we miss out on the swirling activities around us (ever heard of FOMO?). So, we reason that it must be a good thing to be "always on." These are the people who accomplish things. Nobody goes on ABC's *Shark Tank* and says, "I put in a reasonable amount of time and effort into this project." No, they realize they won't get a "shark" unless they tell them they work 80 hours per week at a hurried pace.

We believe busyness is a virtue because we only know it as the alternative to laziness or unproductivity. Perhaps there is a better way.

What Did Jesus Model?



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Read through the gospels with one question in mind. Was Jesus busy? I suppose that would depend on how we defined busy, wouldn't it? If by busy we mean hustling, hurried, overloaded, swamped, frenetic, frenzied, anxious, or unbalanced, then we have to conclude that Jesus was none of these. But if busy means something like active, engaged, working, on a mission, purposed, or diligent then we have to conclude that Jesus was busy.

There is a phrase in Luke 9:51 that is interesting. It says that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." "Set his face" has a connection to the Old Testament. It's connected to Ezekiel, and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. To "set your face" is to have a firm resolution and a fixed resolve towards something. It is focused attention. Accomplishing in every moment what that moment calls for.

And *that* is what Jesus modeled for us. There was never a moment for which the glory of God called for one thing and Jesus did the other. If he was supposed to stop and chat with a Samaritan woman at the well — he wasn't hurried. He engaged her. He did what the moment called for. Likewise, he engaged in rest and solitude if that is what was required. If he was supposed to enter into the hustle and bustle of healing and feeding the multitudes, he did exactly this.

He was busy. But he was the right kind of busy.

What Does Your Day Call For?

Is busyness a virtue or a vice?

That depends on what the moment calls for. If a moment calls for haste, then we had better run. If it calls for a slower and plodding work, then we do well to set our hand to the plow.

What does the moment of today call for? Do that. And do it at the pace which it requires. Doing that is virtuous. Getting outside of those banks will likely lead you into vice.

Sources

John Cassian, *The Institutes*, (Boniface Ramsey, tr.) 2000:10:2, quoted in Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: how the world became modern*, 2011:26.

Tony Crabbe, *Busy*, xvii