

WEAPONS THE DEVIL IS USING - OVERCROWDED LIFESTYLES**INTRODUCTION**

- A. One of the most dangerous habits of the average American today is the habit of *over commitment*: the tendency to commit to too many activities and concerns.
- B. Like most problems in society at large, this is one that has affected the Lord's people. It is, in fact, one of the ways the devil is hurting us most.
- C. We tend to get in the same predicament as Martha, about whom the Lord expressed concern: LK 10:41-42.
 - 1. Much of the time, we would have to characterize our own activity as little more than "going to and fro on the earth". Job 1:7.
 - 2. While "busy here and there" (1 KI 20:40), our very *lives* are gone!
- D. Unlike some of our other problems, the difficulty in dealing with this one is not that we do not recognize we have it. Most of us are fully aware that we are too busy. Being too busy is like the weather: everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything about it.
- E. Over commitment is one of the main things responsible for the lessening of our spiritual vitality and effectiveness.
- F. Our "lifestyles" are simply overcrowded. There is too little time for spiritual refreshment and growth and our schedules are so full of "this and that" that we are failing to tend to our most important priorities.
- G. What can we do to bring the problem of over commitment into sharper focus so that we can and will do something about it?

DISCUSSION**I. GETTING A PROPER PERSPECTIVE ON THE PROBLEM**

- A. Two primary reasons for our being overloaded are our *materialism* and our *fascination with fun*. See chapters on *Materialism* and *Our Fascination with Fun*.
 - 1. We are often guilty of spending an inordinate amount of time working, building a career, making money, etc.
 - 2. We are often guilty of spending an inordinate amount of time on entertainment, recreation, sports, hobbies, crafts, travel, etc.
- B. We seek to diminish the seriousness of our problem with the excuse that our over commitment is "only temporary."
 - 1. In the first place, the situation is often *not* temporary.
 - a. As someone has said, there is nothing more permanent than a temporary situation.
 - b. Somehow we move out of one set of exigencies into another, so that life becomes one unbroken chain of temporarily overcommitted situations.
 - 2. In the second place, by the time the crunch is over we are apt to have missed one or more critical windows of opportunity in our relationships that can never be gotten back.
 - a. What about our *children*?
 - (1) The time in life when many of us are most busy is the time when our children are at their most formative stage.
 - (2) If we lose these years, we can never get them back. It will not matter that we have more time for our families later; by then it will be, for some things, too late.
 - b. And what about our *wives*? James C. Dobson makes this observation:

“Over commitment is the Number One Marriage Killer.” James C. Dobson, *Straight Talk*, rev. ed. (Dallas: Word, 1991), p. 161.

3. If we do not watch out, the “cares of this world” will choke God’s word within us and cause us to be unfruitful. MT 13:22; Cf. LK 8:14. Rather than *rationalize*, we need to *realize* what we are doing with our lives.
 4. It is time for us to wake up. RO 13:11-12.
- C. The same thing is true with activities as with money and material things: our inability to say no strongly resembles an addiction.
1. When it comes to doing things we want to do, we just can’t say no. We are “activity junkies.”
 2. We are suffering the negative effects of a culture that offers *too much choice*.
 - a. Presented with an almost limitless variety of things that are possible for us to do, we are like a kid in a candy store.
 - b. We can’t make up our minds. We want “one of each.” We want to “do it all.”
 3. We lack self-discipline with respect to activities and involvements. We are overindulging. Rather than mastering our activities, they are mastering us.
 4. We make two mistaken assumptions:
 - a. We believe we have a *right* to do *anything* we want to do.
 - b. We believe there is a *way* to do *everything* we want to do without any of our priorities suffering. We assume that if there is a problem, it is merely a matter of scheduling, efficiency, organization, etc.
 5. The word *sacrifice* is not even allowed to enter our minds when we are contemplating the things we want to do.
 6. Yet none of us gets any more than 168 hours a week. We cannot do everything that strikes our fancy. (The rare person who can is a person with a truly meager fancy.)
 7. Our culture serves up to us far more enticing possibilities than we can pursue without shortchanging some of our priorities. Some choices have to be made, some possibilities have to be let go.
- D. We end up giving the Lord little more than our *leftover time*.
1. We do with our time the very thing we know is wrong to do with our money and material possessions: we give the Lord only that for which we have no other use. ML 1:8, 13.
 2. Indeed, we can sometimes be stingier with our schedule books than with our checkbooks!
 3. We may from time to time sacrifice the *halving* of certain things for the Lord’s work, but very few of us will let the Lord stand in the way of our *doing* anything we want to do.
 4. It begins to look as if the Lord gets our time only when there is *absolutely zero else going on*— and, in our society, finding that time when nothing else is going on becomes harder and harder.
 5. When it is always the Lord’s work that “gives” when we have a schedule conflict that ought to be a warning signal to us that something is wrong. Where our priorities are, there will our energy and enthusiasm be also!
 6. How we use our time demonstrates what our practical priorities really are.

II. ASSESSING THE DAMAGE

- A. We need to see our overcrowded lifestyles not just as an unpleasant problem in itself, but as a problem that has created other problems.
 - 1. This is a difficulty that hinders the cause of Christ by keeping us so preoccupied and distracted that God's purposes in our lives are not fulfilled.
 - 2. Can anyone doubt where this problem comes from? It comes from the devil. When we over commit ourselves we give in to one of his tactics and play right into his hands.
- B. Our spiritual vitality has been diminished.
 - 1. As a rule, a person cannot go at the pace we go at without being weakened spiritually.
 - 2. Without adequate time for spiritual refreshment and growth, our inner resources eventually run out — gospel preachers included!
 - 3. Gary R. Collins has written, "Busyness, including busyness with religion and church activities, has been called the 'archenemy of spiritual maturity.' Busy lives have little time for reflection. Never-ending waves of activity keep us from thinking carefully about the important issues in our lives — God, relationships, life purpose, goals, service. Busyness can destroy our relationships. It can stifle spiritual growth and keep us from becoming effective difference makers." Gary R. Collins, *You Can Make a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 49.
 - 4. Not a few of us are "running on empty" right now.
 - a. This is one reason so many, even among the "strongest" of the Lord's people, are falling to sexual temptation, etc.
 - b. We have not taken the time that it takes to build faith, and when the big crisis comes up, we have little to draw on for strength and protection.
 - 5. Over commitment is one reason so many of us are stressed out. Stress is when your *heart* says, "Don't do it; your priorities will suffer" — but your *mouth* says, "Why sure, I'd be happy to!"
 - 6. We cannot fail to take the time for personal "maintenance" without serious consequences later on.
 - 7. God intends that we spend significant time studying the Scriptures, praying, and meditating on Him.
 - 8. No matter who we think we are, if we neglect the means that God has given for our spiritual replenishment, we will not be strong spiritually. It is as simple as that.
- C. Our spiritual effectiveness has been hindered.
 - 1. As a result of being overcommitted, we actually end up having less commitment to what we do.
 - a. Exceptions notwithstanding, it is generally true that we do a better job when we do not try to do too much. The jack-of-all-trades is usually a master of none.
 - b. Our output is so great; the quality of it tends to be no better than mediocre.
 - c. Often, the person who is surest to *keep* commitments is the one who is most careful in *making* them. Cf. EC 5:1-7.
 - 2. Obviously, our *personal evangelism* has suffered from our not having the time to do it. Elders are discovering that it is nearly impossible to find *any* time for congregational activities and work that does not conflict with a secular activity that some of the members are involved in.

3. Frequent and spontaneous *hospitality* has been a casualty of our overcrowded lifestyles.
4. Because our schedules are so closely booked, we are often unavailable to help when “people needs” arise.
 - a. Such needs for help tend to present themselves unexpectedly and at “inconvenient” times.
 - b. Financially, if we operate right at the limit of what we can do, spending everything we make, and then we are rarely able to help others when the opportunity comes up.
 - c. The same thing is true with the budget that governs our *time*. If we operate right at the limit of what we can do — if there is no space in our schedules — we are usually not able to help others when there is a need.
5. Our families have been adversely affected by our “busyness.”
 - a. Nearly all of us are too busy for the good of our families. Even our children are being kept so busy they cannot be children. We are turning them into little adults with miniature schedules that are as overbooked as our own.
 - b. Too often, *parents* — especially *fathers* — are too busy to nurture their *children*.
 - (1) Someone has estimated that by the time a child is twelve years old, a father has already spent over ninety percent of the time he will ever spend with the child one-on-one.
 - (2) If true, this means that American fathers are simply fooling themselves if they think that after they get their careers established they will have any significant time left to spend with their children. They may have time to spend, but by then the kids will be unavailable!
 - (3) “A team of researchers wanted to learn how much time middle-class fathers spend playing and interacting with their small children. First, they asked a group of fathers to estimate the time spent with their one-year-old youngsters each day, and received an average reply of fifteen to twenty minutes. To verify these claims, the investigators attached microphones to the shirts of small children for the purpose of recording actual parental verbalization. The results of the study are shocking: The average amount of time spent by these middle-class fathers with their small children was thirty-seven seconds per day! Their direct interaction was limited to 2.7 encounters daily, lasting ten to fifteen seconds each! That, so it seems, represents the contribution of fatherhood for millions of America’s children.” James C. Dobson, *Straight Talk*, rev. ed. (Dallas: Word, 1991), pp. 63, 64.
 - c. Too often, *spouses* — and especially *husbands* — are too busy to nurture their *mates*.

- d. Perhaps men rationalize spending most of their time on their work by telling themselves that their work is important to a large number of people.
- e. Yet a man makes a poor choice if he chooses to invest himself in “humanity” rather than his family. *It is more noble to give yourself completely to one individual than to labor diligently for the salvation of the masses.* — Dag Hammarskjöld
- f. Rather than trying to save the world, most men would do better to work on saving their wives and children.

III. SEEING THE NEED FOR BALANCE

- A. As with very many of the daily difficulties we have, our time-related problems are often problems of *balance*. We pursue one or two priorities at the expense of all others, letting parts of life get out of their proper proportion to the other parts.
- B. To change the metaphor, our failure is a failure of *perspective*. We do not accurately “see” how one set of activities is really related to the others. We can be tragically myopic, or shortsighted, when it comes to what is important in the use of our time. If we have to admit we have been over committing ourselves in certain areas of life, the answer is not necessarily to totally abandon those concerns. Very often it is to pull them back into balance with the rest of life.
 - 1. Whether we like it or not, life has always involved a number of different concerns. The complexity of modern life should not blind us to the fact that human beings have always had more than one kind of business to take care of.
 - a. Nearly anybody can juggle one ball! It represents no great feat for a person to excel at a single pursuit — one, such as a man’s career, that he is obsessed with and spends virtually all of his time on.
 - b. In real life, however, we do not have the luxury of tending to just one or two concerns; there are a variety of things that have to be taken care of.
 - c. When we over commit ourselves in one or two areas of life — however interested in them (and even good at them) we may be — the result is that other important things are bound to suffer.
 - d. The Prodigal Son “wasted his possessions” (LK 15:13). He recklessly spent everything he had on the pursuit of pleasure, with apparent disregard for *any other need*, no matter how important. The essence of *prodigality* (whether in the spending of money or time) is that it spends with reckless disregard for other priorities.
 - e. Whatever else it is that we think we have to do, we cannot forget about things like rest, spiritual nourishment and family relationships.
 - 2. Our *goals* should be related well to our *roles*; and we simply cannot afford to focus so exclusively on some of our roles that others go unattended to. See Steven R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); Steven R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); and Richard N. Bolles, *The Three Boxes of Life and How to Get Out of Them* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1978).
 - a. We have little to be pleased with if we become very busy, highly developed, and extremely effective in one or two of our roles — and become totally inactive and dysfunctional in the others the Lord has given us.

- b. Often, Jesus' exhortation to us would likely be something similar to what He said to the Pharisees about the weightier matters of the law: MT 23:23.
 - c. It is not an *all-or-nothing* question; it is a question of *balance*. If we have to admit we have been over committing ourselves in certain areas of life, the answer is not necessarily to totally abandon those concerns. Very often it is to pull them back into balance with the rest of life.
- C. Becoming practiced at the art of *personal management* is what it is going to take to get control of our commitments.
 - 1. We are stewards of the time entrusted to us.
 - 2. Time, no less than money, has to be managed well to achieve worthwhile spiritual ends.
 - 3. No more than 168 hours a week is available to any of us. The challenge is to make a wise allocation of the time resources that we have.
 - 4. We need to grasp the concept of EP 5:16.
 - a. Paul urged the importance of a cautious, deliberate approach to daily living: EP 5:15.
 - b. Misusing our time is simply the kind of thing that happens we when fail to look at life seriously and make conscious choices about personal management. *The unexamined life is not worth living.* — Socrates.
 - 5. Years ago Charles E. Hummel wrote a little booklet on time management for Christians called *Tyranny of the Urgent*. We do need to learn to distinguish between the *important* and the *urgent*, and to spend more time on the important. See Charles E. Hummel, *Tyranny of the Urgent*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Meridian, 1991).
 - 6. Before it is too late, we need to get control of our schedules, our activities, our involvements. We need to learn the ability to say no to *anything that would upset the balance of our priorities*.
 - a. We need to be slower to make promises about what we will do, more careful about entering into commitments that involve the expenditure of our time.
 - b. We need to learn to submit our schedules to the Lord for His approval, just as we seek His approval for everything else that pertains to us.
 - c. CO 3:17.
 - 7. Much of what we choose to think is necessary is really not all that necessary.
 - a. Most of us could simplify our lives considerably with no loss of quality.
 - b. Things like unexpected hospital confinements prove that the world continues to move along fairly well even when we are unable to do all the things we thought we "had" to do.
 - 8. We need to learn to *focus* our energies and enthusiasm. Energy is almost always more productive when it is concentrated rather than randomly dispersed.
 - 9. We need to learn to *budget* our time, and that means imposing some *limits* on how much time we spend on certain things.
 - 10. Our priorities have to be protected from encroachment.
- D. We must learn to build adequate "margin" into our lives. See Richard A. Swenson, *Margin: How to Create the Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves You Need* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992).

IV. COMING TO TERMS WITH SCRIPTURAL TEACHING

- A. The example of the Lord Himself is instructive.
 - 1. Few of us will ever come close to being as busy as the Lord.
 - 2. But He never once let His priorities get out of balance; He never became so preoccupied with any set of concerns that He forgot about the others.
 - 3. Most noticeably, the Lord managed His time so as to spend needed hours in communion with His Father in heaven. MK 1:35; LK 5:16; 6:12
- B. In Paul's instructions to the younger Timothy, it is no coincidence that things like *meditation* were linked to the making of *progress* spiritually. 1 TI 4:15.
- C. From a scriptural standpoint, the ideal life for the Christian would be the "quiet and peaceable life". 1 TI 2:2; 1 TH 4:11; 2 TH 3:12.
 - 1. Quietness of lifestyle does not demand absolute inactivity; any more than quietness of spirit demands absolute silence (cf. 1 PE 3:4).
 - 2. Even so, the word "quiet" is not meaningless. At the very least it suggests a way of life that is different from the way most of us are living right now. It would be a step in the right direction for most of us even to admit that the person who aspires to a simple, quiet life aspires to something honorable and wise.
- D. Jesus' blessing upon the "pure in heart" (Mt. 5:8) is an expression of His desire not only that we be clean and innocent in our thinking, but that our hearts be free of any distracting concerns, however good in themselves, that would compete with our affection for Him.
 - 1. The opposite of "pure in heart" is "doubleminded." JA 4:8.
 - 2. We would often do well to emulate Paul's ability to focus on "one thing." PH 3:13, 14.

CONCLUSION

- A. It is not *impossible* to be very, very busy and stay strong spiritually. An exceptional individual here or there may be balanced and disciplined enough to keep his or her spiritual resources replenished in the midst of a hectic schedule.
- B. But for the great majority of us it is quite *unlikely* that it will happen.
- C. The attempt to do it is, at the very least, extremely *dangerous*.
- D. The life we ought to aspire to is a "quiet" life — one in which we mind our own business and tend to our own work. 1 TH 4:11, 12. Few of us ordinary folks, if any, are exceptions to the rule that the rat race is unwinnable. It will kill us long before we figure out a way to "do it all."
- E. In our busy age, we especially need to *Take Time to be Holy*.
- F. With God's help, let's get a better grip on what we are doing with our lives.