

The Surprising Secret to a Productive Life

Today I want to share with you The Surprising Secret to a Productive Life. Psalm 90:12 says *“Teach us how short our lives really are so that we may be wise.”* We get one shot, one lifetime on the dance floor of planet earth. So, I want to take the one and only life that I have been given and I want it to matter. I think residing in each of us is a longing to be used by God in a significant way. And, messages like the one last weekend, spark that longing in us.

And yet, for many of us... we walk out...life beats us up... we have a tough week on the job... we fall back into old, unhealthy patterns and habits...we get buried by our circumstances... and the spark is once again extinguished. And in moments of reflection, we find ourselves discouraged and feeling like anything but a hero.

So, here is the question I want us to wrestle with this weekend? Where does a person in the REAL world find spiritual power to live like a spiritual hero? I submit to you that just being motivated isn't enough. And, making a commitment to try harder isn't enough either.

The good news is that the Bible has given us some compelling and practical answers to our question. And, in John 15 Jesus provides us with a great picture that helps answer our question.

Within 24 hours of speaking these words, Jesus would be nailed to the cross. Little do the disciples realize that in less than one turn of the earth, their world would be turned upside down. Jesus is preparing them for his departure. There are some rough times ahead. In fact, later in John 15 Jesus would warn them of impending persecution. He doesn't candy-coat the future. How would they make it?

For the last 1,000 days Jesus has poured his life into these twelve men. Now the time has come for him to go back to the Father and he would entrust the entire future of his kingdom with this rag tag group of followers. They would become spiritual heroes. The secret to their spiritual fruitfulness and success is found right here in John 15.

“I am the vine and you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5 NIV

In his word picture, Jesus portrays himself as the vine and God the father as the gardener. Followers of Christ are described as branches connected to the vine. What a great visual of a spiritual reality. The branch grows out of the vine and is

totally dependent on the vine for its life and strength and productivity. Life flows from the vine into the branches.

Here is the point. A life-giving connection to the vine is the pre-requisite for fruit bearing. There is a direct correlation between my union with the vine and my spiritual fruitfulness.

Many Christians I know genuinely want to grow spiritually and occasionally have bursts of motivation. Yet, what is missing is a vital connection to the vine. They are not remaining or abiding in Christ. The result is a soul that is under-nourished and a spiritual life that isn't very strong.

I wish we had a soul scan machine that would let you see the condition of your soul. Your soul is just as real as the internal organs of your body that you have never seen. But, it is our nature to focus on the externals of our lives. After all, it is what we can see. The danger is that you can neglect the internal and unseen. And there are consequences.

It reminds me of a scene I witnessed several years ago in Dallas. They wanted to take down the old YMCA building in order to erect a skyscraper. Because of several other large buildings on the same block and some historic sites, they couldn't just indiscriminately start pounding away with a wrecking ball. They decided to implode the building. For weeks everything on the outside looked very normal. But all the while on the inside explosives were being set and a plan was being made to implode the building. I will never forget going downtown on the Saturday morning they were going to destroy the building. They barricaded the streets and then the charges were detonated. And, you heard the sound but for a few seconds it looked like nothing was happening. But, then, the walls began to crack and give way and the whole structure lazily fell to the ground.

That scene reminds me of a lot of people I know. On the exterior, you would think everything is going well. They live in a nice neighborhood, have a great job, drive a new car, have good friends, and may be very involved in their church, but they are paying little or no attention to their souls.

Or, think of it like this. People keep zipping around the race track of life. And, they have the pedal to the floor and they are running wide open just as fast as they can. And, they don't want anyone to pass them. But, there begin to be some rattles under the hood. So, what does the driver do? He comes in for a pit stop so that his crew can pop the hood and see what's going on inside the car. He takes a pit stop because you can't fix the problem going 200 mph. I want you to think of this service as a spiritual pit stop. Some of you are running wide open just as fast as you can and this pit stop is a time to slow down long enough to take a look under the hood.

And, if we were to pop the hood on your soul, we would discover that the problem for many is that you are just going too fast. The pace and drive of your life is keeping you from a vital connection to the vine and that is keeping you from producing a fruitful, productive, heroic life.

Here is an important principle I want to spend some time on this weekend . . .
Following Jesus cannot be done at a SPRINT

Now, I want to be honest with you. This is an area where I struggle and that I constantly have to be aware of. There are many weeks where my vital connection to the vine has been lost due to the incessant demands of a full life.

Speed and spiritual depth do not make good partners. You cannot develop spiritual intimacy on the run. Yet, the pace of life continues to accelerate and we are addicted to speed. People now sleep two and a half hours fewer each night than people did a hundred years ago. The average work week is longer than it was a generation ago. WE are busier than ever. We cram every hour full and try to do more, quicker.

I want us to look together at a story in the Old Testament that I believe helps us diagnose some of the symptoms of a life that is racing "too fast" and this story also gives us some clues about steps we can take to stay connected to the vine.

There he came to a cave, where he spent the night. But the Lord said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" [10] Elijah replied, "I have zealously served the Lord God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I alone am left, and now they are trying to kill me, too." "Go out and stand before me on the mountain," the Lord told him. And as Elijah stood there, the Lord passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. [12] And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper. [13] When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. 1 Kings 19:9-13 (NLT)

Elijah was a courageous spokesman for God in the Old Testament. Just a chapter earlier, he has had his famous showdown with 450 prophets of the false god Baal and 400 prophets of the false god Asherah. And, it was Elijah all alone to stand against them. Shortly after this miraculous event, the evil queen Jezebel takes out a contract on Elijah's life. The Bible says that Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.

There is a lesson in here. It is one thing to stand up against 850 false prophets, it is something else to take on one ticked off woman.

Anyway, Elijah runs for his life. He plops down under a tree and in severe depression, asks God to just take his life. An angel brings him food and water, ministers to him, and God sends him on a 40 day journey to Mount Horeb. When we pick up this story he is spending the night inside a cave. This has been a stressful, fast paced season in his life.

I love God's question. "Elijah, what are you doing here?" I am convinced it's rhetorical. God doesn't really need an answer, but Elijah has one. "I have zealously served the Lord God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I ALONE am left, and now they are trying to kill me, too."

Let me summarize Elijah's answer. MY LIFE IS HARD. That brings us to our first of three realities I want to talk about. During each of these points I want to share one reality and one response.

1. **When life is too fast, I lose PERSPECTIVE**

Elijah has just come through a fast paced, pressure packed season of life and the result was a skewed perspective.

When life gets too fast, it is easy for us to start feeling like Job. . .

My days go by faster than a runner; they fly away without my seeing any joy. Job 9:25 NCV

We start living life in the fast lane and we are going so fast that we never have time to enjoy the journey and I promise you that if you stay in the fast lane very long you will lose perspective.

Notice a couple of things here in this passage. Elijah's focus turns inward. He is no longer thinking about anyone else but himself. Also, notice how harsh he is toward his fellow Israelites. "All of your people have abandoned you and I am the only faithful one left".

Here is an observation. When you and I are running fast and hard, it siphons off our compassion. When you are moving too fast you don't even notice people who need a touch of God's grace and when your life is crammed full your heart will become hard toward people.

In fact, God has given us warning lights in our lives to indicate when we may be moving too fast through life—it's called pain, it's called fatigue, it's called stress, it's called loss of joy, it's called irritability.

And, then we just lose perspective. We don't see things clearly or accurately. Elijah wasn't seeing things accurately. Actually, in v.18 of this chapter God will tell Elijah that there are still 7,000 who were still faithfully committed to God.

Let me give you a brief sidebar here—one of the great benefits of regular attendance at the weekend services is the benefit of perspective. Each week we come and we are reminded what life is all about and we re-align our commitments and priorities with God's.

Let me ask you a question? Have you lost perspective? Don't live in denial about this one. You are not the exception to the rule. When you live life at breakneck speed, you are in danger of a crash.

EX—train a couple of weeks ago north of LA that was carrying lumber and got loose—sped down the tracks for several miles until finally it derailed.

My Response: SLOW DOWN

Maybe the first step is to simply step back and take a good, hard, honest look at why we are so driven and why we are living at such a fast pace. I think it is easy for us to quickly assume the role of "victim". And while circumstances can play a role in the pace of our lives, many of us need to "own" the issue.

Could it be that my pace of life is driven by my insecurity, or an unhealthy desire to succeed, or to please others? As long as I confuse my worth with my work, I will be driven and stressed out.

Let's be honest. It's not easy to slow down our lives. With all of our lamenting about how busy we are and the pace of our lives, many of us are addicted to speed. It makes us feel important. We like pushing the envelope and we like the adrenaline rush of a full life. And, even in moments when we think we'd like to get off the treadmill, we aren't quite sure how. How do you slow down in a world that just keeps speeding up?

Filling up every second and compressing time characterizes our society. Thousands of products are marketed on being able to save time. For example, there is a medication that is marketed for women "who just don't have time for a yeast infection"—like some women do have time for that.

So, the result is that we become impatient with things that are slow. We hate dead time. Dead time is any time when nothing happens—no sound, no motion, no image. In our bored culture, it is to be avoided at all costs.

But here's the truth: the loss of dead time is killing us, inch by noisy inch. Our souls need some dead time.

So, let me encourage you to back off on the RPM's this week.

- Try walking a little slower this week
- Try driving a little slower this week.
- Don't look for the shortest line at the store
- Eat slower this week
- Take a stroll with a spouse or a friend

2. When life is too fast, I lose my SPIRITUAL CONNECTION

I love the next part of the passage here in I Kings 19. The Lord says to Elijah “go out and stand before me on the mountain.” In the NIV it says “go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

We often say “don't just stand there, do something.” God says to Elijah “don't just do something, stand there!”

The insatiable need for speed sets us up for a monumental spiritual struggle. Speed, hurry, activity, and LIFE drain our souls and cause us to lose our spiritual connection. It might well be true that the pace of life is doing more to shatter our souls than anything else. When you study the life of Jesus you soon discover that he was never in a hurry. Jesus took time and he took his time. One of the things he regularly took time for was time alone with his father. These carefully guarded moments with his father were spiritually energizing and replenishing.

If you want to live a productive life, you must stay vitally connected to the vine. And if you want to stay vitally connected to the vine, you must “abide”. And if you want to “abide”, you must have time and margin in your life to spend time alone with Christ.

“In order to grow in grace, we must be much alone. It is not in society that the soul grows most vigorously. In one single quiet hour the soul will often make more progress than in days of company with others.” Andrew Bonar

As much as we believe in small groups and community around here, there are some things that you cannot get from your small group. Your small group cannot provide your vital connection to the vine. That is a personal relationship between you and Christ that is deepened through prayer and solitude and time in God's word.

The same thing that is true for our marriages is true for our souls. Have you noticed you don't build intimacy in your marriage in a hurry. It takes time and it takes time consistently. And it takes blocks of time.

Be still and know that I am God. Psalm 46:10 NIV

Let me ask you, do you have time in your life when you are still? Quiet? Or, do you need constant stimulation and entertainment? Cultivating the quiet can be a painful experience when you are addicted to noise, excitement, and entertainment.

Now, here is a truth I don't want you to miss. God speaks in the margins of your life. To know God and stay connected to the vine, you must create space in your life to be with God.

Quietness and time alone with God recharges your soul and replenishes your emotions. When was the last time you spent any extended time without the radio or TV on, just being with God?

George Muller—in his autobiography—“It has pleased the Lord to teach me a truth, the benefit of which I have not lost for more than 14 years. The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not how much I might serve the Lord, or how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished”

In fact, this is so important that God put this in his Top Ten list.

Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days a week are set apart for your daily duties and regular work, but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. . . “ Exodus 20:8-10 NLT

The Sabbath is a day that God reserves for us—for the best part of life, for both the enjoyment of the Lord in worship and the enjoyment of rest and relaxation. We now live in a culture that prides itself on being open for business 24/7. Observance of a Sabbath is grounded in the conviction that life is more than work and that weekly I need a day of margin and a dedicated time to be in worship and be with God. God will not fill a heart that has no room.

God wired us to need the rhythm of a Sabbath. Marva Dawn in her book about the Sabbath says “IN an age that has lost its soul, Sabbath keeping offers the possibility of gaining it back. In an age desperately searching for meaning, Sabbath keeping offers a new hope.”

Thomas Moore has written “The vessel in which soul-making takes place is an inner container scooped out by reflection and wonder. There is no doubt that some people could spare themselves the expense and trouble of psychotherapy simply by giving themselves a few minutes each day for quiet reflection”

In other words, imagine your soul as a container or bucket. Your life is full with things, pressures, distractions, temptations, and fast-paced living. Thomas Moore says that it is reflection and wonder (solitude and Sabbath) that scoops

these out of our soul. It is through solitude that there is now room in your soul for you to meet God and for him to do the work in you that he longs to do.

The problem is that we fill our hearts and souls with lesser gods and we can miss the richness of the relationship with God that we were created to enjoy. Your heart does not have an infinite capacity. Solitude and Sabbath creates capacity for God.

My response: STAND STILL

Sebastian de Grazia declared in 1962 “Perhaps you can judge the inner health of a land by the capacity of its people to do nothing.”

So, take a Sabbath.

- Take a full day off
- Have a day this week where your whole family turns off the TV and stereo
- Have an intentional time of solitude--
- Buy a worship CD—spend time this week in personal worship

Then Jesus said “Come to me, all of you who are wear and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle, and you will find rest for your souls. Matthew 11:28-29 NLT

Notice that Jesus said “Come to me”. The antidote for your overloaded soul isn’t a plan for time management. It’s not a seminar on stress reduction. It’s not in a pill or a bottle. It’s a person. Jesus doesn’t say “come to church” or even “come to your small group”. He says “come to me”.

“yoke”—not a harness. It was a piece of farm equipment that was put over two animals so that the load would be shared and lightened. So, the yoke brought the animals together as partners and it lightened the load for both. Here’s the point. When you are yoked with Christ or in the word of John 15, “when you are abiding in the vine” there is “rest for your soul”.

So, when life moves too fast, I lose perspective and I can lose my connection, but also

3. When life is too fast, I lose my DIRECTION

Let’s briefly go back to our passage in I Kings 19. Elijah is standing there and the Bible says a great wind came up. It was so powerful that it shattered the rocks. And Scripture says “but the Lord was not in the wind”. After the wind was an earthquake. “but the Lord was not in the earthquake.” After the earthquake came a fire, “but the Lord was not in the fire“. Then, came a gentle whisper. God wasn’t in the spectacular and dramatic as much as he was in the ordinary.

The Lord then again asks Elijah “What are you doing here?” You get the sense that Elijah wasn’t supposed to be here. He had run ahead of the Lord. IN verse 15 of this chapter, God tells Elijah where he is supposed to go and gives him his marching orders. But, it wasn’t until Elijah was still and heard the still small voice of God that he got back on the right track.

When life moves too fast, it is easy to lose our way. It is easy to lose our sense of purpose and priority.

I love Solomon’s words in Eccles. 4:6

Maybe so, but it is better to have only a little, with peace of mind, than be busy all the time with both hands, trying to catch the wind. Eccles. 4:6 TEV

Trying to talk above noise--

My response: LISTEN

The goal of solitude is not so much to unplug from my crazy world as it is to change frequencies so that I can hear the Father. Richard Foster has said “Solitude doesn’t give us the power to win the rat race, but to ignore it altogether

Noise canceling headphones—

“It is hard to be silent, silent with my mouth, but even more, silent with my heart.” Henri Nouwen