

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The business of busyness

Presented by David Reay

Whenever people gather together to engage in casual conversation, invariably mention will be made about how busy life might be. This applies to stay at home mothers, to retired men, to corporate executives, to tertiary students, and even to children. It seems everyone is busy and they usually complain about it.

The question we pose now is whether being busy is something to boast about or whether there ought to be limits to our busyness. No one is advocating a lazy, slothful existence. No one denies the fact that certain times and occasions cause us to be busier than we might like to be. But what about constant busyness? Must we always be so busy or is there a better way?

Those who follow Jesus Christ may feel particularly pressured to be busy. After all, so much good can be done. And Christian work can be seen as the most important work that can be done. Every minute counts. So being busy for God must be a good thing. But is it?

Granted that life involves activity and some degree of busyness. But why are we so often too busy? What are the dangerous motivations that drive us to be busy?

Perhaps from childhood days we have learnt to measure our worth by our achievements. If this is so, then we will be flat out trying to do lots of things in order to validate ourselves. We want to feel important and figure that doing lots of things gives us importance in our own eyes and the eyes of others. So we are driven to busyness to get a sense of our own worth.

We might have an overriding desire to please others, to gain their approval. One way of doing this is to say “yes” to their requests. We lack boundaries, unable to decide for ourselves what needs to be done. We march to the beat of many drumbeats that are not our own. Remember that an inability to say “no” to requests means we can scarcely say a genuine “yes” to requests.

For followers of Jesus, there is the question of over sensitive consciences. We see a need and figure that we have to step in and meet it. If we don't, who else will? If there is a problem around the place it is up to us to fix it. Remember that not even Jesus fixed everyone up. At times he even went away from people in need in order to spend time with his father. That way, his activity was always fruitful and never frantic.

On a more negative note, we can be too involved with too many things because deep down we have a desire to control. We want to be fixers and movers and shakers. We can even develop a Messiah complex. We begin to think we are indispensable. It is so easy for a genuine desire to help to become a darker need to control others. We might complain about how much we have to do, but we might complain more loudly if any of that work was taken from us.

On a more mundane level, we can be too busy because we are simply disorganised. Some people take a long time to achieve very little. They complain about how much they have to do when in fact they don't have too

much to do. They simply don't organise what they have to do effectively. Or their lack of self discipline means they may take on too much, try to squeeze too much in. They fail to allow for problems or changes of events. Failure to plan ahead or prioritise means we are at the mercy of circumstances.

A contrast to the disorganised person is the perfectionist. They end up with the same sort of over busyness but they get there by a different route. They have to ensure everything is just right. A task that might take some others about an hour might consume a whole day for a perfectionist. And it is no use telling a perfectionist to do less: they will simply use up the time to make sure everything is even better than it might otherwise have been. Perfectionists can drive people crazy, and their high standards can in fact cripple productive activity.

So there are many reasons for busyness that are nothing to boast about. Being busy is not an evil, is not wrong in itself. But being busy for reasons as indicated means there is something not right in the core of our life. Being busy may reflect a keen and godly desire to serve others and make a difference in life. But if our motives are more doubtful, the results may not be as pleasant.

What might result from us being far too busy for the wrong reasons? If we are too busy because we are trying to prove how worthwhile we are we have effectively dismissed the importance of God's grace. Recall that grace is God favouring us even if we don't deserve it and irrespective of our achievements. We tend to measure our acceptability by God by how much we do for him.

In turn, this reduces much Christian work to being functional. I do certain tasks in order to feel good about myself and keep myself in God's good books. I begin to love Christian work more than I love Christ. Others become part of my programme or activity rather than people to love. I am so busy doing God's work to please him that I spend little time with him. One of the lessons from the story of Mary and Martha and Jesus was just this. Martha was very busy for Jesus but Jesus suggested Mary's desire to merely be with him was preferable.

Jesus was so fruitful because he sorted out his priorities. He didn't just do things, he thought about what to do and why to do it. Only as we cease our restless doing will we find out what truly needs to be done. Being too busy means we don't have time to figure out what really needs to be done.

Related to this, we lose our personal identity. Aiming to please others or to live up to our own unrealistic performance driven standards means we don't live out who we really are. We are too busy doing to concern ourselves with being. All our many activities conspire to guard against any helpful personal reflection.

Too much of the wrong sort of busyness has other practical consequences. Quite simply we get over fatigued. There is a healthy tiredness that comes from productive activity and is handled by some rest or a good night's sleep. Fatigue is different. It is an ongoing weariness that isn't simply the result of activity but too much of the wrong sort of activity. We are worn out because what we are doing is not feeding us or fulfilling us but rather draining us. Fatigue puts strains on our bodies and causes our health to suffer.

We also become unreliable. The old saying goes that if you want something done ask a busy person. This is true if by busy we mean someone who is active and motivated and wise. But those who are too busy are not at all dependable. They take on so much and may be so frazzled that they end up being unable to keep all their commitments. They turn up late or not at all. They volunteer for positions then fail to fill them properly.

Perhaps even more seriously, the wrong sort of busyness doesn't allow us to develop friendships. Creating and sustaining friendships is time consuming. Forming acquaintances is different. All our activity may give us lots of acquaintances but may keep us from deeper friendships. Really busy people are so often so task

oriented that they have little time or even inclination to simply spend time with people. To waste time with people. They are so busy rushing from one thing to another that even if they make appointments for friendship they may not always be able to keep them.

So if you find yourself constantly complaining about how busy you are, it is no minor matter. It has consequences. For yourself and for others. We have to find ways of overcoming this sort of thing so as to get our lives and our relationships in some better order.

What can we do to ensure our lives are productively active while not being subject to all the unhealthy aspects of busyness? One practical thing we might do is to learn to get control of our diaries or calendars. We learn to decide when to say “yes” and when to say “no”. When we let others control our time it is not usually good-heartedness but laziness that is behind it. Cultivate the art of saying a firm yet gentle “no” to the many good and nice things you might be asked to do. This helps you say the firm and genuine “yes” when need be.

We take the time to regularly reflect on what we are doing. Is that commitment we made last year still a valid one for this year? Has that particular season of activity passed? Also, we can even audit our time. From time to time make a list of just how much time you spend on various things. Do they line up with the sort of person you are and the sort of things God has placed on your heart? Is there alignment between who you are and what you are doing?

One other practical step we can take is to establish margins in our days. Instead of cramming so much in to each day, allow margins for the unexpected. The traffic jam, the late train, the last minute phone call, the ill health. Allow more time to do things so you can enjoy cushions of spare time to relax and enjoy yourself. That might mean doing less but may well mean enjoying what you do a whole lot more and being more reliable in what you do.

Many are too busy because they are feeding some inner desire that is not healthy. If I am a person who thinks my worth is measured by how much I do then it is good for me to take time to explore more of the nature of grace. And also explore just where I derive my sense of worth from. Have I truly grasped the love of God for me which is not based on performance? A bit of internal housecleaning along these lines will help us order our lives in a healthy way.

All this is connected to aligning ourselves with what God wants for us. God has made it clear in the Sabbath commandment that he didn't make us for constant activity. We are meant to rest, we are meant to observe certain rhythms in our life. If we don't take time off to recharge and rest, we are not being heroic, we are being foolish and disobedient.

Our main priority in life is to love God and experience his love for us. We thus need to give time to God and not lose ourselves in busyness even if it is church based activity. Like Mary in that biblical story, we take the time to sit at Jesus' feet. Not out of laziness, and not all the time. But at least make it a priority. Only as we resolve to be reflective Marys can we become truly effective Marthas. For those who think inactivity is a waste of time this might be hard.

But three things can be said about that. One is that being with Jesus in silence or rest is not inactive. Another is that we will end up wasting lots of time if we don't first get our marching orders from Jesus. And the last point is that Jesus longs for us to simply be with him and not just be up and about doing things for him. Any love relationship is based on time spent with one another not merely things done for one another.

The value of our lives is not measured by the volume of activity in them. It is measured more by the love we invest in our activity. More by the way in which we march to the beat of God's drum. We are not created to be busy, to be machines maximising our output in the service of God.

We are made to receive his love, pass on that love to others as part of our giving back love to him. This involves work. Even being busy. But we are to live as people who are not pushed and pulled into frantic activity, but as those invited to enter into the creative and liberating dance of loving service to God. We are ultimately not driven people but called people.