

Theology for life: Handling our time

Sunday, 24th July, 2011

Why do this series?

Through the summer we are going to be looking at some parts of our daily lives and how God wants to affect them.

What we want to do is to hold up the Bible to our lives and use it to measure how we're doing and also challenge us if in some areas how we are living is out of step with what the Bible says.

The aim is not just that we know more stuff, but that our lives look different as a result.

It's so easy to just do what we've always done or it's just part of the culture we grew up in, or we copy others around us; but we end up with certain things in our lives that we think are godly, but are actually a bit off from what the Bible tells us.

With my car, it's easy to just get used to the wheels not being aligned correctly, or the engine not quite being tuned or the tyres not being blown up enough – and as long as it gets me from A to B, I can live with it.

But then, when it's been to the garage and been tuned up and the wheels are pointing the right way again, it feels great to drive!

(Plug for Ali's garage!)

My hope is that this series will act a bit like a spiritual tune-up for our lives.

Specifically we are going to be looking at some of the 'everyday' parts of our lives and seeing how God's Plans and Purposes can affect these.

What I want us to look at today is the whole idea of how we spend our time.

Because for some of us I think this can be a source of guilt, where we feel like we're never quite doing well enough, or a source of drivenness where we push ourselves so hard that we have lost sight of grace.

Some of us waste lots of time – and feel guilty about it; others never have enough time and feel like you’re just managing to cling on – and feel guilty about it!

As a generation in the UK I think we have lost a lot of discipline in our lives – and that means there are a lot of lazy people around.

And we can easily bring this attitude into our relationship with God.

We don’t like discipline or being told what to do very much, and we hear phrases like “Love God and do what you like” or “Grace” or “God loves you whatever you do” and partially understand them, and think (or more likely decide subconsciously) “I don’t feel like getting up to pray today – God won’t mind!” or “I can’t be bothered going to the prayer meeting!”

And for people who have grown up in the Middle East, you have probably grown up seeing too much discipline – being told to go to the mosque; pray 5 times a day; fast, but without really knowing why or seeing any benefits.

And it’s possible to let the same attitude affect our walk with Jesus – either by going through the motions of praying out of duty, or by thinking “I’m free from that duty – so I’ll really enjoy not having to pray and enjoy not being told what to do!”

God has a better way than either of these though and that’s what I want us to look at now.

I heard someone say once that if you did all the things people told you to do in a week, there wouldn’t be enough hours in the week; especially if you’re a Christian!

If we did everything we were told we **have to do**, it might look something like this:

- Come to the Church meeting on a Sunday
- Serve during it

- Plan what we are doing if we are serving
- Pray before it
- Talk to guests
- Help with whatever needs doing
- Have quiet times every day
- Show hospitality to people
- Tell our neighbours and friends about Jesus
- Be a good worker – often for more than 40 hours a week!
- Be a good husband or wife
- Be a good father – spend time with our children
- Study
- Read Christian books
- Spend time building our friendships
- Run our households well
- Be part of a community group
- Get to the prayer meeting
- Be involved in the community
- Do some exercise
- And have a day of rest!

The problem is that we'd all probably agree that everything on this list is important and deserves to be there, but it doesn't fit! A list like this is almost impossible to keep on top of – and so something gets neglected or pushed out

And then busyness of life can overtake us – and suddenly we notice that we haven't picked up our Bible for a month – and we feel bad and guilty because we haven't "Given God His time"

The Bible has something to say this and we'll look at it in a minute.

But first, let's remind ourselves of what Jesus is like:

Firstly, He gets rid of condemnation. There is one that condemns, but he is not Jesus – he is the ‘accuser’

Wherever Jesus went, He brought freedom, not guilt. God didn’t send Jesus to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.

Wherever Jesus is, things get better rather than worse; Jesus said:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

If you don’t feel like your burden is easy or light, then maybe you’re not coming to Jesus, but going somewhere else instead.

So Jesus gets rid of condemnation and our heavy burden, but also, instead of saying ‘Don’t worry about it, it doesn’t matter’ He shows us God’s Way and stirs our hearts to want to follow him.

So He didn’t teach “You must give 10% and pray 3 times a day” But if we’re understanding that correctly, the very fact that He doesn’t force us, makes us want to follow Him – so our hearts want to give more and pray more!

So I want to talk about 2 Biblical examples of we should look at our time, and I hope that through this we will leave here feeling free from any guilt or condemnation and also stirred to press into God more than ever.

Firstly, we have Jesus’ own example and teaching.

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:5-6)

I don't think that Jesus was saying that the only place to pray was in secret – actually, as a Jewish man, He would have prayed 3 times each day and would have prayed publicly in the Temple and in synagogues.

And the early Church devoted themselves to prayer together and clearly didn't see that as going against Jesus' teaching.

What Jesus was speaking against was praying (and later in the chapter fasting and giving) in public so that people would see you.

It wasn't that the hypocrites loved to pray that was the problem – and it wasn't necessarily the when or the where; the problem was the “why?”

The reason they were praying (and fasting and giving) was to be seen by men – not firstly for God.

And Jesus called them ‘Hypocrites’, which literally means ‘actors’.

About 4 miles away from Nazareth where Jesus spent most of His life, was a large town called Sepphoris, it was being built and extended during Jesus' lifetime and He, as a carpenter almost certainly would have worked there.

In the middle of the town was a theatre, and the actors who worked there were called hypocrites.

What Jesus is saying in this passage is that God isn't impressed by actors – people who pray so that others will think of them as something they are not.

And instead of this, it's better to hide away and pray in your cupboard where there's no chance of anyone but God seeing you – then you won't be acting; you'll be praying sincerely out of love and worship and relationship with God your Father.

And Jesus in His life lived out that Relationship by praying whenever He could:

After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone (Matthew 14:23) – in the context this was probably about 9 hours of prayer.

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. (Luke 6:12) – a whole night in prayer

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. (Luke 5:16)

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)

There is a danger though that when we read these passages we notice the when and the where, but miss the why?

Jesus went to lonely, quiet places to pray and chose early in the morning and late at night not because they were more spiritual, but because in His middle-Eastern culture, whenever people were around, He would be interrupted. Jewish hospitality and the fact that Jesus was so well known meant that wherever He was, crowds would gather.

So the “why?” is important – it was because being with His Father was more important to Him; it was the most important thing, and so He made time for it – He couldn’t live without it.

The danger is that we can be told “Copy Jesus” and somehow we think that early in the morning, alone, is the right way to pray.

And so the idea of ‘Quiet Times’ has grown.

I don’t want to criticise quiet times or a disciplined prayer life, but if it’s out of duty rather than love the danger is that it is empty.

And if it’s to impress God or anyone else, then it’s just acting.

God wants so much more; He wants your friendship!

It’s Louise’s birthday today – I didn’t buy her a present out of duty – I bought it with love.

When I go home, I don’t go out of duty I go because I love her and want to be with her.

When I phone her, I don’t phone out of duty, I phone because I want to speak to her because I love her.

When she talks to me I don’t listen out of duty; I listen because I love her.

If I started relating to Louise out of duty, I'd be worried about my marriage, because duty kills love.

But love is so much more powerful and important than duty.

Jesus loved His Heavenly Father – He never once in all His life prayed a prayer out of duty.

So firstly, look at the “Why?”

And secondly, we need to look at the question of who we belong to.

We have an idea of a ‘good Christian’ as someone who prays regularly, gets to all the meetings and has quiet times (times alone with God) every day.

If I showed you a diary like this (show slide) you would probably think that the person writing it was a good Christian,

But this isn't necessarily how the Bible says we should live and there is a danger that we can ‘give God His hour’ or do my daily reading, and then do what we want with the rest of our day.

This idea doesn't come from the Bible; it comes from Greek philosophy which said that spiritual things are good and worldly things are bad.

So you would try to live for spiritual things like praying, but the less spiritual things like eating or work or sex or relaxing or exercise might be necessary, but they aren't godly and so at best God puts up with them, but it's probably best not to enjoy them!

Actually, the Bible's view is more like this: (show slide)

This is what people in the Bible believed – this is how Jesus lived.

Everything we have belongs to God – and God wants to be involved in everything. There's no such thing as spiritual and secular; it all belongs to God!

To God, work or eating or hospitality or relaxing are just as ‘spiritual’ as praying or reading the Bible or worshipping.

So it's not that quiet times are not important; it's just that God wants more!

If we give or tithe, what we are doing is a reminder that God gave us everything we have, and it all belongs to Him – so we give, hopefully remembering that if God wants it all, he can have it all.

Similarly, if and when we devote time to God, it should act as a reminder that our whole lives belong to Him.

It's not that we give Him an hour to keep Him happy, and then we can get on and do what we want with the rest; it's a reminder that it's all His.

And that's how the Jews and the Bible and Jesus saw it.

There was no division between God's time and theirs; it all belonged to Him – every part of life.

In Deuteronomy, fathers were given instructions on how they should pass on God's Commandments:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. **Love** the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts (not your diaries!). **Impress** (chisel) them on your children (with the idea of carving the children into shape, like a statue being carved out of a rock). **Talk about them** when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. **Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.** (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth. (Deuteronomy 11:18-21)

Wherever you looked, night or day, whatever you were doing, God was a part of it.

God wants to break out of our quiet times into our lives.

He wants to reclaim parts of our lives we've forgotten He had anything to do with!

He wants to invade our work; our shopping trips; our relaxation; our meal times; our marriages!

We don't need to find time for God in our busy lives; God, the One we love – our Father is our life!

Jesus wants to break off any condemnation and win our hearts if they've got cold.

Pray.