

**Love Your Neighborhood:
NO TIME FOR NEIGHBORS**

One of the greatest barriers to connecting with those living around us is lack of time ... or our belief that we lack the time ... or that we don't make it a priority of our time.

It often seems that my life is spent pulling in and out of my driveway on the way to or from a church event, a child's event, a doctor's appointment, and now and then a recreational event. I drive past my neighbors' homes many times each day and don't know many of them. When I get home I'm consumed with a variety of household chores and family needs. Sometimes I muse that it would be great to be retired, then I hear some of you talk about how you're way more busy now that you're retired than when you were working! We're all pressed for time it seems.

Last week I began this series of messages about loving our neighborhoods. I've been reading several books about neighboring and being a Christian in your neighborhood and I plan to share insights from them. Jay Pathak & Dave Runyon have written a book called *The Art of Neighboring* and in chapter 3 they talk about the time barrier to connecting with our neighbors. Today let's consider some of their observations.

If you take the Great Commandment seriously, to love God with all your heart, and then just as seriously the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, you may well end up feeling conflicted. I mean, you have relationships in your life already and they take time. Who among us has ever found an extra 20-30 minutes lying around on the sidewalk? How are we ever going to find time and energy for one more relationship, let alone six or eight with our neighbors?

Many of us are already challenged to make time for God once a week. And yet... Maybe God is asking you and me to take a step back and ask ourselves if we live at a pace that allows us to be available to Him and to those who live around us. Does that mean we should just stop everything else we're doing and focus on our neighborhoods? Maybe not. But we should take a hard look at our commitments and priorities to see if there's space for God and those living around us.

Our Time Problem

We're now living in the 21st century with all kinds of conveniences that some of us couldn't have dreamed of in the 20th century. Fifteen years ago you'd never have dreamed that you'd be able to:

Make phone calls while riding in your car.

Send email while riding in your car, while you are making phone calls, while a voice from a GPS gives you directions to your destination.

See the people you are talking to on the phone.

With technology has come hopes of “having more time.” But that hasn’t proven true. Technological progress tricked us into trusting it - then it exhausted us. Each new invention and innovation promised to make our lives simpler, easier, time-saving, and many have. But we’ve just added more tasks into our lives. I’m as much a part of this syndrome as anyone. Technological progress has lured us into believing we’re smarter, more aware, more informed. **But technological progress does not translate into wisdom.**

And here’s the lies we tell ourselves as we race through lifeⁱⁱ:

- ***Things will settle down***

someday or *if I can just get through Wednesday this week, everything will be fine.* But there’s always another pressing deadline after that.

- ***More will be enough.*** We

convince ourselves that just one more purchase or achievement will bring us contentment. If I could *buy* more, or *do* more, or *be* more then things would be good. But there’s always something better on the horizon.

- ***Everybody lives like this.***

Everybody lives at a frenetic pace, so we’ve got to keep up. That’s not true, not everyone lives like that. There are some healthy people out there.

The healthiest person who ever lived was Jesus. He got a lot done, but when we read about Him, the word *hurried* doesn’t come to mind. When Jesus said, ***“I have come that they may have life and have it to the full,”*** (John 10:10) he didn’t mean “full” in the sense of having a packed schedule. He meant a good, meaningful life. Do you think Jesus would have been upset if the Temple service went longer than an hour? Imagine Jesus getting a text from someone during the Last Supper ... should he read it, respond to it? Would you?

Some years ago Richard A. Swenson, M.D wrote a book called *Margins*ⁱⁱⁱ in which he talked about our modern time crunch and how we leave little margin, or breathing space, in our lives. “The clock and Christ are not close friends. Imagine what God thinks of us now that we are so locked into our schedules that we have locked ourselves out of the Sermon on the Mount. Could we afford to walk the second mile with someone, given our schedules? We jump at the sound of the alarm [clock] ... but sleep through the call of the Almighty.”^{iv}

Trade-Offs

People generally become good at anything for which they have an aptitude or talent. But to be really good it takes repetition – doing it over and over again. That is certainly true of great athletes and musicians, as well as those in many other fields. Here’s the problem: **becoming a good Christian**, a disciple willing and able to follow our Lord’s commands, **takes time and repetition.** That means

making choices in life that are often trade-offs between one good and another good.

Though our issues may be different, most of us struggle with busy schedules and competition for our attention. Yet, if we truly want to be great neighbors, we will have to say “no” to some good things so that we can focus on what is truly important. Numerous times the gospels report how Jesus turned aside from his planned agenda to care for someone who seemed to be interrupting him (the blind man, the children, healing an official’s daughter, a woman with a flow of blood). Jesus got a lot done, lived a passionate, purposeful life but never in a rush. That’s because He stayed focused on the main thing.

Be Intentional: “In this life we can do only a few things really well; I think it’s a good idea to make certain that one of those things is what Jesus says is most important.”^v Psalm 90:12 says, *“Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”* If we don’t purposefully choose how we spend our time, those choices will be made for us; we’ll just let life happen to us. Of course relaxation time is necessary - “down time” - but leave room for meaningful endeavors.

In Luke 10 we find the story of Jesus at the home of Mary and Martha. Martha is scurrying around to prepare food for Jesus and his disciples, while Mary sits at his feet to listen. Martha is upset that her sister isn’t helping her serve. Jesus says, *“Martha, Martha ... you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her”* Luke 10:41-42.

Sounds crazy! Martha gets reprimanded for serving Jesus?!! I mean, isn’t that what we’re supposed to do? But Jesus’ point is that we must learn how to say “no” to some good things so as to focus on what’s most important. Service to or for Jesus must begin first with Jesus, sitting in His presence. That’s why worship comes before service. It reminds me of Paul’s advice: *“Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way,”* 1 Corinthians 12:31. Our purpose in life is to love God and love our neighbors. That may mean foregoing some good things for what is needed. Love and hurry are fundamentally incompatible. Love always takes time, and time is the one thing hurried people don’t have.^{vi}

Excellent Timing

1. Keep The Main Thing The Main Thing Remember from last week? It all begins with loving God with all our might. Everyone needs God time. Last week I said that loving our neighbors begins with loving our Creator with all we’ve got. Because He is not pushy about His agenda, God is easy to forget. He just waits ... and waits ... and waits. What does he think of our “prayers on the run?” What happened to “Be still and know that I am God”? Societies, and

people, who have the accelerator to the floor are doomed to become God-less.^{vii} Speed does not yield devotion.

2. Avoid Time Wasters Develop the art of saying “no” to things that get in the way of your top priorities. Watching TV, surfing the web, or playing video games aren’t evil. They just don’t get you to your top priorities in life.

3. Be Available This means being available to God and to others. It’s a willingness to be inconvenienced for the sake of others. Most of us quickly fill up our weekends and evenings with needs, errands, and activities. But when we leave some margin in our time we can live with a level of peace that allows our schedule to be interrupted for the sake of relationship building.

Margin of time exists for the same reason we do: for the purpose of being available to God. What’s the number one requirement for serving God? Be available... available for the needs of the Kingdom, for service to one another, for the building of community. **Quite often the most important thing God has for you in your day is not even on your schedule.**

But when we have margin in our schedules we can offer our time to the Father. God might bid us use that time to pray, meditate, to serve, or even to go introduce ourselves to a neighbor we don’t know, or other ways of cooperating with His eternal purposes. Being useful to God and to other people is a large part of what life is meant to be. We must be willing to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. It is the discipline of humility that we do not assume that our schedule is our own to manage, but allow it to be arranged by God. God invented time in the first place and reserves the right to set the rules for its use. I think God values faithfulness over busyness.^{viii}

When we fly across the country and need to change flights, say in Denver, we don’t allow only three minutes. A much greater margin of time is needed between flights. So, if we make such allowances in our travels, why don’t we do it in our living? Life is a journey and we need to take time for what’s of eternal value. That’s just it. Have we forgotten the eternal perspective? Do we even think about anything beyond our own generation?

Neighboring Is An Art

Loving your neighbor is one of the Bible's most repeated commands. It is the opposite of selfishness -- the common human practice. Acting in divine love demonstrates that unselfishness is possible for a human -- showing a reality that cannot be ignored or denied. Whether they appreciate you, or respond to your love, Jesus's command is still valid: show love to your neighbor in a practical way. So, the important questions to ask ourselves are: *Do I live at a pace that allows me to be available to those around me? Are all of the things I'm doing more important than obeying Jesus' commandment to love your neighbor?*^{ix}

God never intended for time to oppress us. Rather, time is just God’s way of making sure everything didn’t happen at once. We are free to use it, and if we

are wise, we will use it with eternity in view.^x Sure, we may make a choice today and then question it or regret it later. There is no one right schedule or program that will tell us how to be great neighbors. It's an art... we're humans after all. Nevertheless, God is with us ... we have the power of prayer at our fingertips ... we *can* make friends for God with our neighbors.

But **you can't love your neighbor well if you live an overscheduled life.** "Crowded lives produces fatigue - and fatigue produces irritability - and irritability produces indifference..." and that leads to perceptions of lack of affection and esteem.^{xi} We certainly don't want that. When people are too busy the result is long-term friendships are fewer and neighborhood identities fade away. We don't want that either.

God gave us life, God gave us time, God gave us each other. God gave us neighbors. It sounds to me that Jesus is asking us to reorient our priorities and reorient how we see ourselves: driven to complete every task? Or, free to develop relationships with those around us.

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself" Galatians 5:14.

ⁱ Jay Pathak & Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring, Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 45-46.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard A Swenson, M.D. *Margins, Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, (Colorado Springs, CO, Navpress, 1992).

^{iv} Ibid 155.

^v Pathak & Runyon, 50.

^{vi} John Ortberg, in Pathak & Runyon, 53.

^{vii} Swenson, 154.

^{viii} Ibid, 160.

^{ix} Pathak & Runyon, 57.

^x Swenson, 161.

^{xi} Dr. James Dobson, in Swenson, 154.