

## WORKING SMART

LABOR DAY, 2008

Vince was frustrated. He was a 27 year old young man who really hadn't gotten started living yet. He hadn't seemed to accomplish anything in life. It appeared to him as if his life was just going around in circles. So Vince made a decision. He would concentrate on what he was best at, and he would work hard at it to be the best that he could be. That decision was a turning point in Vince's life. Vince could never have known the importance of that decision. He couldn't possibly have known that he would only live 10 more years. But what a productive 10 years those would be. Vince produced more than 1,600 paintings and drawings during those last 10 years of his life - every artistic work that he produced during his entire life. And it seemed that when Vince had problems during that time, he would focus more and more on his work and become even more productive during his trials. In fact, Vince painted 70 paintings in the last 70 days of his life. Each of our lives have been enriched because Vincent VanGogh made a critically important decision in his life – a decision to spend his time and energies doing what he was best at and what he loved to do the most.

It is amazing how much a person can achieve if he or she focuses his time and energies and works smart. That is the theme that I would like to discuss with you on this Sunday in which we celebrate work - Labor Day.

And to do this, we want to focus our attention on an example who is far more impressive than any mere human artist regardless of how prolific that artist might be. We want to focus our attention on the ultimate artist. He is the one who created all of the beauty around us in the first place. He is the one who made us with any creative abilities that we have. He is the one who having lived for all eternity past entered this world of time and history taking upon himself a human body so that he could provide our redemption. Certainly, of all people who have ever lived on this planet, none can be shown to be a better example of a worker than the Lord Jesus Christ. He often said that he came to do his father's work. And what an amount of work he accomplished. The Apostle John ended his gospel by saying, "Jesus did many other things as well (that are not recorded in this book). If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." John 21:25. All that work in just 3 short years. How was Jesus able to accomplish such productivity?

I want to look this morning at 3 principles of work that Jesus practiced in his life. These principles can be examples to us so that we can be more productive in what we are trying to accomplish.

1. Jesus prioritized fruitfulness over busyness.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel, this great passage in which Jesus presented the allegory of the vine and the branches, Jesus often spoke of the importance of fruitfulness. Notice these continuous references.

READ John 15:5,8,16

*JN 15:5 "I am the vine; 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. . .*

*8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. . .*

*16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last.*

The vine as well as the tree are commonly used pictures in the Bible for the godly person. And certainly these are apt symbols of godly living. For a vine or a tree is never frenzied or frantic. In fact, a grape laden vine or a lush, green tree is symbolic of tranquility. It is not that vines or trees are inactive. No, on the contrary, they are full of activity. But the vast majority of the activity is unseen, behind the scenes. The roots digging out the nourishment from the soil, the sap rushing the nutrients to the extremities of the branches, the bark defending the pulp from the elements. All the while, the picture is one of control and tranquility. And the result is great fruitfulness.

Jesus Christ lived his life in such a way. He was never in a hurry, he never appeared to be harried or out of control, he never is presented in the Bible as rushing around. He was not a stressed out, busy man in the modern sense of the term. But he was fruitful.

What he did counted for eternal value.

Now we certainly don't want to imply that Jesus was slothful. Nothing could be farther from the truth. You might have seen pictures of the sloth. The sloth is a tropical animal that lives most of its life hanging upside down from tree branches. When forced to the ground, the sloth crawls at the rate of 10 feet per minute - a whopping one ninth of one mile per hour. Sloths are generally sluggish and inactive. They build no nests for their young and seek no shelter for themselves. Basically they sleep hanging upside down 15 to 22 hours a day, rising in the late afternoon to eat whatever leaves happen to be close at hand. Sloths are so passive that they are virtually untrainable, no obvious good to anyone at all. That is the reason for their being used to describe a lazy person who will not work at all. Jesus Christ was not a slothful person. He worked hard, long hours.

But he prioritized fruitfulness over mere busyness. The opposite of the sloth might be the hamster in a cage. We have all seen hamsters that get on that little wheel in their cages and run and run for all their might. They expend tremendous energy. But they end up going nowhere at all. In the final analysis, what

is the difference in the results of a sloth's lifestyle and a hamster's lifestyle? Not much is there?

One of the great problems with the concept of work in our nation today is that many confuse fruitfulness with busyness. Now downright slothfulness is certainly condemned, and rightfully so. Lazyness is not upheld as a virtue by most people in our nation today. But we have thousands of people who are running on wheels in their cages. From all external appearances, they are very busy people. But what is being accomplished by all of their efforts? What of eternal value is being done?

If we are to work smart, we must learn to distinguish between fruitfulness and busyness. We do that by looking at the results of our labors. In our service for the Lord, fruitfulness means that we will be devoting a good portion of our time working within the areas of our spiritual gifts. God has given to each member of his body special gifts. As we utilize these, we will find our greatest fruitfulness.

Fruitful people are not harried. They are not out of control. They are not always running around in a hurry. They rather are involved in activities that are well thought out. They are investing their time in productive ways. Jesus Christ was this type of person. He is never pictured in the Bible as being in a hurry - but look at what he accomplished in just 3 short years. He was fruitful, not just busy.

2. Jesus prioritized the importance of a matter over the urgency of a matter.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Mark we find an interesting anecdote from Jesus' life. READ Mark 3:20;31-35.

*MK 3:20 Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. . .*

*MK 3:31 Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him.<sup>32</sup> A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."*

*MK 3:33 "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.*

*MK 3:34 Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!<sup>35</sup> Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."*

Christ's family heard that he had engaged in theological debate with the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders. He is in trouble now, they reason. We must bail him out of this mess. So they urgently come to get him. Now they consider this to be an urgent situation. They had travelled several days on foot for this occasion. If any of us had an usher come down and say that a family member had traveled from another town to come and get us, we would consider that to be an urgent, emergence matter, wouldn't we?

But what did Jesus do? He didn't go out to meet them. He had the confidence that what he was engaged in was of such primary importance that he set that which was more important over that which appeared to be more urgent. And this is a principle that we must all understand, especially in the day in which we are living. For we have billion dollar agencies trying to get us to react on the basis of urgency. We must learn to distinguish between that which is important and that which merely appears to be urgent.

On the screen behind me is a square, the idea of which is taken from Stephen Covey's book entitled "7 Habits of Highly Effective People". The 4 quadrants of this square illustrate almost every task that we perform so that we can evaluate it.

Quadrant 1: Tasks which are both important and urgent. These must receive a high priority from us.

For me, preparing this sermon falls into this category. Sermon preparation is a very important task for me. Taking a half an hour's time from a couple hundred people is not something that I take lightly. That is about 100 working hours, the equivalent of a couple working weeks for a single person. That is a very serious responsibility and I consider it to be such. I have to be well prepared if I am to take that kind of time commitment from people. But sermon preparation is also an urgent matter for me. Sandy will tell you that as the week draws to a close, especially if it has been a pressured week with many demands, I feel under greater and greater pressure.

For 11:00 Sunday morning is going to come and I have to be ready, whether I'm ready or not. So sermon preparation is both important and it is also urgent for me - therefore, it is a top priority.

We all have tasks like this that are urgent and important. These are normally easily recognizable.

Quadrant 2: Urgent but not important. These are tasks that scream for attention, but are not really that important. Routinely, many of us experience such a task around dinner time. We will just have gotten all of the kids around the table and prayed for the food, when the phone will ring. There is nothing that illustrates an urgent task in our culture more than a phone call - the phone screams for immediate attention. "Answer me, answer me". We walk over to answer the phone and find out that it is a telemarketer wanting to sell us something. The telemarketer has called because he knows that the best time to find people home is around dinner time. But if you're like me, you consider most telemarketing calls to be a nuisance. Which task is more important and fruitful to you in your life - eating dinner with your family or trying to defend yourself against a telemarketer on the phone? But the phone call presents itself as a much more urgent task than eating with your family.

Many of the tasks that we do every day fall into this category. They present themselves to us as being urgent, but they're not important at all. And frankly they end up wasting our time.

Quadrant 3: Important but not urgent. These are the most difficult to spot. For they don't cry out for attention, but they are critically important to us. Devotional Bible reading and prayer would be examples here. They don't cry out for attention, but they are indispensable to our spiritual walk with the Lord. Physical exercise and taking proper medication might also be examples here. These tasks are most crucial. They don't cry out for immediate attention, but they are critically important for our wellbeing. We are trying to focus on this quadrant this fall in our "Get My People Going" emphasis.

Worship would fall into this quadrant. Worship is a critically important activity to us. We were created in part for the purpose of worshipping. But worship doesn't scream out for our attention. If we sleep in some Sunday morning and miss the worship service, there normally isn't a visible consequence. And isn't it amazing how easily some matter that presents itself as being urgent can rob us of the worship that is so much more important in the long run. Every once in a while, one of us will forget to turn off the cell phone before entering the Sanctuary and the phone will ring in the middle of the service. The phone is our societies' poster-child of urgency. If a phone were to start ringing right now most heads would turn towards the song. The worship that is much more critical is interrupted, isn't it? Urgency would have once again trumped that which is more important but not urgent.

One of the characteristics of a successful person is the recognition of that which is most important but not necessarily urgent in life. As we live our lives most consistently in this quadrant, we find the greatest fruitfulness, meaning and purpose in life.

Quadrant 4: tasks that are not important nor are they urgent. They are just a plain waste of time. And usually, they are easily seen to be just that. Sitting around vegetating in front of the TV set for long periods of time when we don't really need to unwind or relax, squandering time at work needlessly by just not doing anything at all (playing solitaire on the computer), these would be examples of tasks that are not important nor are they urgent.

Now Covey points out in his book that human beings are only wired to be able to cope with so much urgency in life. So the real danger is found in spending too much time in quadrant 2. When we function in quadrant 2, we are like the hamster on the wheel. We have enough urgency capabilities to cope with activities in quadrant 1 and 3. But if we spend too much time in quadrant 2, we then are likely to spend a great deal of time in quadrant 4 as a way of recovering. We over-extend our urgency capabilities, so we need to crash to recharge. And what practically happens to a person who spends a great deal of time performing tasks in quadrant 2 is that he begins to spend the majority of his life in quadrants 2 and 4 rather than 1 and 3.

Now we will never completely eradicate all quadrant 2 and 4 tasks from our lives - that is an unrealistic

expectation. But we can evaluate what we do during the day. And successful people are the ones who eliminate the most tasks from quadrants 2 and 4 and use the time to move those tasks to quadrants 1 and 3, especially quadrant 3 because that is the most difficult one to spot. Successful people spend the vast majority of their time in the top 2 quadrants rather than the bottom 2. Successful people are the ones who recognize those tasks that do not cry out for immediate attention but are very important and carve out time for those tasks in their schedules.

Jesus was that type of person. He recognized what was most important in life and consistently devoted himself to those tasks. And he did not allow apparent urgency to dissuade him from that course in life.

3. Jesus prioritized living for today rather than continuously living for tomorrow. READ Matt. 6:25-34.

*MT 6:25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?"<sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"<sup>27</sup> Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?*

*MT 6:28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin."<sup>29</sup> Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.<sup>30</sup> If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"<sup>31</sup> So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'"<sup>32</sup> For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.<sup>33</sup> But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.<sup>34</sup> Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*

One of the greatest temptations that we each face is getting overwhelmed with tasks. When we think about all that we have to do tomorrow, this week, this month, the rest of this year, we can become literally paralyzed with anxiety over all that needs to be accomplished.

I like what Psychologist David Burns has to say in addressing the irrationality of such a lifestyle. He compares the performance of our work with eating food. Imagine, he writes, that every time you sat down to eat, all you could think about was all of the food that you would have to eat in a lifetime. Instead of just seeing just a plate on the table in front of you, you envisioned a huge room filled with tons of meat and vegetables and deserts with a great pool of beverage - and all you could do was think that I have to consume every bite of this and drink this whole lake before me before I die. What do you think your response would

be? Probably, the sight of all that food and thinking that we had to eat all of it would make us pretty sick to our stomachs. We would have a tendency to think that this single meal set before us wasn't that significant in light of all the food that we were going to eat in our entire lifetime.

The secret to eating, of course, is just to eat one meal at a time. It is amazing how much food we can consume in a lifetime if we just eat one bite at a time.

So it is with our work. As people become consumed with the magnitude of the tasks that lay before them, it is no wonder that they begin to think that the daily task that they have before them is not that significant in light of all that they have to accomplish. But a life is made up of seconds and minutes and hours. It is amazing how much can be accomplished if we live one day at a time.

That doesn't mean that we don't make plans for the future. But it does mean that we don't live in the future. We live for today. Because, in reality, we can't be sure that we will have a tomorrow in which to work. Jesus Christ might come back today. Or we might pass into eternity tonight. God designed for life to be lived one day at a time.

Jesus Christ is our model in every aspect of life. That includes our work habits. If we are to become Christ-like in all areas of our life, we must allow the Lord Jesus to be Lord in our work patterns. As we do this, we find great fulfillment in work for we begin to work smarter. We sense the priority of fruitfulness over busyness, emphasizing tasks that are important over those that are merely urgent, and the need to live each day rather than worrying about tomorrow.