

Special Section: Too Busy?

Take A Load Off

Are you doing more than God intended?

By David W. Henderson

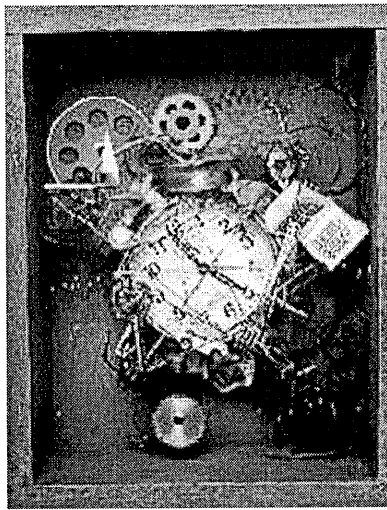


Illustration by Stephanie Garcia

I rub my eyes and stare down at the legal pad in front of me.

What stares back at me is my to-do list. It's not a pretty sight. It is covered with 10 or 12 hurriedly drawn boxes, each of which is filled and spilling over with dozens of little scribbles: A phone call to return. A meeting to set up. A note to write. A sermon to prepare. A car to service. I feel overwhelmed.

There must be 150 things to do. By the end of a typical day I might have done 11 of them. Or five. So which should I do? I want someone to hand me a piece of paper that says, "Do this."

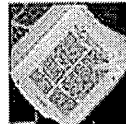
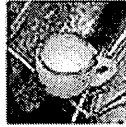
I'm stuck, like a car with its wheels whirring on winter ice. Feeling a panicky urgency to be doing 87 things at once, I end up doing nothing.

Been there?

Don't you get the sense that something might be a bit out of kilter for us, driven as we are by our calendars and to-do lists? Somehow I have a hard time imagining the disciples running their lives by Day-Timers. Picture it. Jesus calls together the Twelve and tells them He's going to send them out to deliver the bound, heal the sick, and proclaim good news. Peter pipes up first: "Count me in! As long as I can be there for the yacht club annual meeting two nights from now, I'm all yours." Thaddaeus is next: "Gosh, I've got a dentist appointment tomorrow at four o'clock, and step aerobics Wednesday at noon. But hey, Thursday from two to four is open; shall I pencil it in?" By the time we work through Bartholomew's kid's T-ball game, Philip's early

morning sales meeting, and James’s weekend ski trip, the mission is indefinitely postponed.

Did the early disciples know something we don’t know? How do we face the daunting task of fitting together a busy life and career with God’s Kingdom purposes? Of sorting through our thousands of responsibilities and landing on the dozen or so that really matter most?



Illustrations by Stephanie Garcia

An Invitation to Light Living

Jesus says, “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).

We know the words well and find some comfort in them. But is this what we experience? An easy yoke? A light burden? Yokes and burdens, yes. But light and easy ones? Rest for the soul? No. Most of us strain against yokes that are very different, and far heavier, than what Jesus intended for us. And almost always, when we look closely at the initials carved in the burden that we strain against, we find that they are yokes of our own making.

So how do we shed our heavy loads and our busy schedules and take on some lighter fare? Not easily. We live in a culture that values motion and holds up busyness as a special sign of significance. “Oh, you’re so busy. You must be *important!*”

Still, it can be done. Notice something when you look back at that verse: two words—*yoke* and *rest*—are repeated twice in these three short sentences.

Rest is a word that suggests the stopping of motion—like turning off a hot car at the end of an eight-hour drive. The spark plugs cease firing, the pistons stop clamoring, and the engine comes to sudden stillness: resting, stopping, ceasing.

But notice that the rest Jesus promises is soul rest, not body rest. His concern is internal, at the level of the heart. He says that He will bring an end to the clamoring in our *souls*, introducing quiet and contentment in its place. So the image of rest that comes to mind of lounging in the sun on a Maui beach is probably not as accurate as, say, the picture of getting to your car after you’ve just finished climbing one of Colorado’s 14,000-foot peaks. Your body is spent, your feet are throbbing, but your soul is refreshed, alive, and quieted. The rest, the peace, is on the inside.

The word *yoke* is also an interesting one. I suspect we all know that the word describes one of those big wooden contraptions that pass over the shoulders of oxen and attach to a

plow that follows behind. What you may not know is that, in Jesus' day, the word *yoke* was also a synonym for obligations, the sum of all of the duties that someone had to shoulder to fulfill a commitment in a certain area. So, for example, monthly principal and interest payments would be the yoke of the person who takes out a mortgage.

So *rest* and *yoke* are nearly opposites. The unexpected twist is that Jesus brings these two words together to describe what happens when we follow Him. When we take on His yoke, He says, we experience the unexpected: rest.

Rephrasing Jesus' words, then, we come up with something like this: "Come to Me, all you who are worn out and weighed down by scrambling to meet the demands of others, and I will bring quiet to your spirits. Serve *Me*, follow *Me*, and—because I am caring and understanding—I will stop the clamoring in your souls. For what I ask of you is not a burden at all."

Busy, Busy, Busy

Look what happens to most of us when we come into the Kingdom. We enter the Kingdom on the sole basis of our having received what God hands to us. But what happens once we're in? We throw ourselves into serving this King of ours, and our schedules begin to get stuffed with important things to do.

Now, let me be clear that there is nothing inherently wrong with hard work or a full schedule. But *how* and *why* we busy ourselves is a different story. I think our frantic busyness belies our real convictions about service and ministry. We act as though it is all up to us. As though something were at stake. As though it would not get done if we didn't do it. As though our significance were somehow tied up in it. As though our well-being, God's pleasure—in fact, our whole relationship with God—depended on it.

It is perhaps the most basic of all temptations to believe that our effort is indispensable to God. Could our serious case of Day-Timeritis find its source here?

But it is not all up to us. It is all up to Him. When we apply Matthew 11:28–30 to our busy lives and schedules, we need to come to grips with this: that not only faith but *the whole of life* and *ministry* must be understood simply as a response to the initiative of a gracious God. He will lead us into the work and ministry He has for us, and we simply get the adventure of holding on tight to His hand and enjoying the ride.

Ephes. 2:10 tells us, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do *good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*"

That means that instead of our cramming our lives full of things calculated to please God, we can—confident of the pleasure God takes in us through Christ—be led into acts of ministry that God has already planned ahead for us. He will lead us into it, He will show us how to do it, He will provide us with everything we need to complete it, and He will bring about His desired results through it. All we need to do, as Henry Blackaby has put it, is watch to see where God is working and join Him!

But how do I do that? Let me suggest seven steps that might prove helpful as you begin to discover God's lighter load for you.

1. Strip off your self-made yokes.

We need to recognize and lay aside those many things we busy ourselves with that God has not called us to.

Every week there seems to show up on my schedule—and maybe on yours as well—at least one thing I have taken on simply because it gets me something. Maybe it is the attention that

comes from caring for someone. Or maybe it is spending time with someone from whom I think I might manage to win some favor or benefit. More than I'd like to admit, I spend time doing some things for no other reason than to get something from them.

How do we recognize the yokes of our own making? Over the years I've discovered that there are some simple questions that can help me begin to recognize those pretenders:

- What is the real motivation for what I am doing? Am I doing this to meet some need in myself? To prove something? To gain something? To avoid something?
- Who am I trying to please by doing this—Myself? Others? God?
- Why do I feel compelled to do this? Do I feel as though something is at stake? What would happen if I waited? If I didn't do it at all?

Asking this kind of question can help us tell the difference between being called and being driven, as Gordon MacDonald once put it. Called people do things out of a sense of having listened and heard. Driven people do things because they feel they have no choice; something is at stake.

2. Make yourself open and available.

Seeking His Kingdom needs to be the highest desire in our lives. Glorifying God, seeking and saving the lost, laying down my life for my brothers and sisters, obeying divine intentions: are those really the things that give shape to my life? Have I really made the things that matter most to God the things that matter most to me?

Jeremiah expressed this attitude in a beautiful way when he wrote: "I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). We are not our own, but His. And His desire is that we would be wholly so.

So we must come before God on a daily basis and give the whole of our lives to Him. As I've come to understand it, that means making ourselves open to whatever God wants to do in us, and making ourselves *available* for whatever it is that God desires to do *through* us. Open and available. Those are the people God uses.

3. Ask Him to lead you into the day.

Next, we must lift the specifics of today and our future days before the Lord. We can ask Him to sift through those many options that vie for our time and attention, and show us the handful that are part of His timeless intention for that day.

Sometimes, those things aren't even on our list. Part of how God keeps us dependent on Him is to throw a few surprises into our day to see how open and available we really are. God's surprises often feel to me like major disruptions, but they are really divine appointments. Those times when God chooses to drop us in a long line at the grocery, right next to a person He wants us to meet. Or when our four-year old calls during a board meeting to tell us about losing his first tooth. Or when a car with its hood up by the side of the road leads to revamping our whole afternoon. Part of inviting God to order our day means that we let Him continually order it and reorder it as the hours unfold—knowing well that the most important work God desires to do is often His work in us, not through us.

4. Build in pockets of time for reflection.

The emptiest of lives are those stuffed with motion from morning to night. It is only when we have elbow room built into our days and into our lives that we become still enough for God

to speak to us.

It is not a coincidence that the phrases “wait on the Lord” and “be still” are found so often in the Scriptures. Regular time to quiet your spirit before God and ask what God seems to be saying, how He seems to be moving, and where He seems to be leading is crucial. Intentional prayer about the demands of the day, moments of quiet between appointments, and monthly retreats to break with your normal routine: all of these are pauses that put us within reach of God’s voice. We should see them as nonnegotiable, ways of wetting our finger and holding it up in the air to see which way the wind of God’s Spirit is moving around us. How else will we be able to see which of the things we are now busying ourselves with are a waste of time, and which other things we haven’t even thought of should be at the top of our list?

5. Test what you hear.

In the quiet that we carve out of our busyness, God speaks to us. But other voices can be heard in the quiet as well. Our own, chiefly. So now we must weigh what we have heard, to see whether it is the whisper of God.

As I understand it, there are three main places we need to turn to test the authenticity of God’s voice. First, we need to hold our sense of calling up against the plumb line of the Scriptures. Does what I sense God is calling me to do seem to square with the central themes that rise up in the pages of Scripture again and again?

A second testing point is the wisdom of others around us. Consulting with other believers, especially the kind of people over whom God’s Spirit really seems to hold sway, is one of the surest ways to expose those voices that pose as God’s.

Finally, we can expect God’s call on our lives and on our days to fit well with our passions, gifts, and sense of life purpose. After all, stewardship—the idea of making the best use of the riches that have been entrusted to us—is a central biblical idea. As Dawson Trotman said: “Don’t waste your time doing things others can and will do, when there is so much to be done that others cannot or will not do.” God’s directives will work in concert with, not at odds with, the passions and gifts He has planted within you.

6. Be clear on timing before you act.

As you consider your sense of God’s call, be careful not to mistake what with when. God called Paul into ministry—and then promptly sent him away for 14 years to get ready. He anointed David as king, and then had him wait nearly two decades before He seated him on the throne. What we are to do and when we are to do it are two different answers to prayer.

In fact, it is here that we often run into one of our greatest temptations: impatience, followed quickly by taking things into our own hands. God has put something on our hearts to do, but we wait and wait (for what seems like two days short of forever) and it doesn’t come about. So we pull an Abram. We take matters into our own hands and try to make it happen ourselves.

When God calls us to something, He will open the opportunities; we don’t need to pry them open for ourselves.

7. Be faithful to whatever God calls you to.

God never promised to lay the whole plan of our lives out in front of us. But He has promised to faithfully lead us into the future one day at a time. Our responsibility, in turn, is to be faithful to whatever He invites us into. To answer the voice of God, not the voice of security, or convenience, or comfort, or visibility, or self-concern, but God’s voice. To follow the

nudgings of God’s Spirit into the unknown tomorrow, regardless of how difficult it seems.

If He has called us to it, He will give us what we need to carry it out. He won’t say “go” without showing us the route and the destination, He won’t say “build” without giving us the plans and supplies, and He won’t say “speak” without giving us the words and the hearers. God’s faithfulness invites a response of faithfulness in return.

Life is too short to piddle it away doing anything less than what God has for us. Let’s be resolved to let nothing nudge us aside from the faithful fulfillment of God’s intentions for our lives—for in the end it is not in greatness but in faithfulness that God finds such great delight.

Our Daily Work

In the early years of the Italian Renaissance, painters like Michelangelo were often commissioned to paint enormous murals. The best method they found for these murals was fresco painting, in which you paint right onto a wet plaster wall. That way the paint and the plaster dry together, and the crisp, vivid colors are preserved.

But it isn’t possible to plaster and paint an entire wall in one day. All that can be done is one small part of the whole. Sometimes a fresco painter can expect to make great progress in the course of a day; if he’s painting the background he might be able to paint a stretch of wall 10 feet by 10 feet. But if he’s working on the details of, say, a bouquet of pink gladiolas or a dimpled child’s face, he might finish only a small portion the size of a dinner plate. So each morning the painter mixes up a small bucket of plaster and then coats the portion of the wall that he believes he will be able to finish before the sun goes down that night. And that small portion of the whole wall is called the *giornata*, the “day-piece,” the work that can be done in a day.

Isn’t that a beautiful metaphor for the work of our days? Life is not a crowded to-do list but a blank stretch of canvas. And there is a Master Painter whose desire is to take that blank canvas of our lives—the whole sweep of our three score and 10 years—and transform it into a masterpiece. Some days He may want to do an expansive work through us, leading us in such a way that broad ripples curve out from our work of the day and touch dozens of others’ lives. Other days His interest may be in doing only a small, quiet work on our own interior. And that is wholly His to determine.

This is our privilege and our responsibility: to wait before Him, to begin each day by relinquishing the brush to the Master. For the canvas is not ours to paint, but His. That leads me to lift up this prayer each morning as dawn cracks open the sky and throws its colors against the world:

Lord, what do You have for me today? Hold sway over me. Make me open to Your Spirit and available for Your purposes. Lead me today in my giornata. I pray this for Your glory and for the sake of Your Kingdom. Amen.

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: Before You Leap*

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: Fast Or Slow Lanes?*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

DAVID W. HENDERSON is associate pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado. "This article," says David, "spills out of my own struggles with busyness. For the past three years I have juggled pastoral ministry, doctoral studies (including writing a book), and family life (I'm a husband and father of four children ages two to eight). I wrote this to share some of the questions I've learned to ask and some of the pitfalls I've learned to avoid."

On Your Own
Before You Leap

1. In order to enjoy God's lighter load for our lives, we need to begin asking for His guidance before we fill up our calendars. Look at your schedule for the next four weeks, then ask the following questions.

- What is my real motive for doing this activity?
- Did I leave room in my schedule for surprises from God?
- Are there pockets of time for reflection when I can be still enough to listen to God's voice?
- Should I seek counsel before committing to this activity?
- Am I rushing into an activity ahead of God's timing?
- Can I follow through faithfully on each commitment I've made?

2. The psalmists repeatedly asked God to lead them and guide their steps. They held God's wisdom in high esteem. How does David describe God's guidance in Psalm 19:7–11?

3. Read Psalm 25:4–5; Psalm 25:9–10 and Psalm 139:1–10. List the reasons God is a trustworthy guide.

4. Use the prayer from the end of this article and the above verses from the Psalms to shape a prayer of your own that will surrender each day into God's hands.