

Leadership & Submission

– Sunday School Notes –

8 Busyness: the Need to be Needed

So much for men who overwork. Now let us “flip roles” and look at women who are overloaded with the work they have to do.

You know this type of woman, because you very often find her in church. It is the woman you can always count on. When you want a job well done, you go and ask her. She never turns you down and puts a lot of energy into that task, so the result is often even more than you expected. In addition to that she cares for her husband and her children, and she works.

It is easy to like her, because she is so reliable and gets so much done. But when you take a closer look, you will notice that she is under a lot of stress. She hardly ever finds rest and – although outwardly she and her family are very happy – they really don’t have much time for each other.

Some people use the word “quality time” at this point to cover up that something is wrong. They say “rather 5 minutes of quality time together than a whole afternoon spent without purpose”. There is some truth to that, but in reality this is a pretty bad excuse for our unwillingness to *make* time for your family. 5 minutes is definitely not enough, no matter how intense they are. How do you believe your kids think about it when they are left alone for 23 hours and 55 minutes per day? So, *what about a whole afternoon of quality time?*

The phrase “quality time” is probably the cause for many of the problems we have with overwork today. It is a very *worldly term* and we churches make the mistake to adopt it – and the thinking that goes with it. We believe we can have it all: a hard job, a family, several offices at church, and always be ready for additional voluntary tasks. Of course we can’t spend much time on all this, so we try to do it more intense – at a higher quality. Our forefathers weren’t so stupid to even attempt all this. They knew that they were finite beings, created by God and not almighty themselves. Today we tend to forget that we have limitations.

And the consequence? We are constantly worn out – especially the women who work, manage a household, and are active in church at the same time. Many of them have difficulties to say *no*, when they are asked to do something. They need the feeling that others need them. They feel the urge to help others – even if that goes beyond the strength they have. Psychologists have developed the term *Helper-Syndrome*, to describe this type of woman – because eventually they reach a point where they simply have no energy left, and still don’t know how to say no to others.

8.1 What is the problem?

Before we look at the possible reasons for women to be that way, let us look a bit at the situation where they are in. The world has changed a lot in the past 50 years and with it the traditional view of women. A vast majority of today's women go to work for various reasons. There may be financial reasons for that. Or there is the belief that without having a job you're not really a person, because "being just a mother" seems not to be enough.¹

On the other hand, the traditional duties haven't disappeared and women still feel their responsibility for the household. **Titus 2:4–5** says

That they – *Paul is talking about the older women* – may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.

A similar description can be found in **1. Timothy 5:14**.

So, according to God's word, women *are* supposed to be managers of the home, and almost all women feel that way – whether they are Christians or not.

The trouble is, today they also work! So in fact, they have two jobs now. But many husbands don't see a necessity to make their burden easier, because they do not feel responsible for the household. Well – **1. Timothy 3:4–5**, which states the qualities of an overseer, clearly states that a godly man must be able to manage his household well – which clearly states that the responsibility for the household is not only "a woman thing".

Nevertheless, the woman is always the one who *feels* responsible – whether her husband fulfills his obligations at home or not. I know women, and statistics say that this is not an unusual situation, who have a much higher paid job than their husbands but still do almost everything in the household. As a matter of fact, they don't even *want* their husbands to do more around the house. In addition to their success at work they want to keep what has always given them self-esteem – the ability to take care of their home and family. So even if they feel pressed down by the many things that have to do at home – they don't want their husbands to interfere with that. **Proverbs 31:10–31** is their motto – the woman who can do everything at once, is praised by everybody, and still looks beautiful.

8.2 Wrong beliefs behind busyness

The question is, of course – is that possible? Compared to biblical times there is so much where a woman can excel: A successful career, a happy husband, well-adjusted

¹Well, if you recall the long list of job titles associated with the word "mother" that we received on mother's day, you know that "being just a mother" is in fact more than sufficient.

children, a trim figure, a gourmet kitchen, and a clean bathroom, and a meaningful ministry in the church. Can she really have it all at the same time?

The woman who tries to have all that is under a lot of stress. But she still keeps on going that way. Why do you think, does she do that? What are her reasons to accept the pressure and take more and more burdens on herself? What are her attitudes that create this stress?

ACTIVE PHASE!!

1. *Need to perform well*
2. *Need to prove something*
3. *Need to be active (rest is laziness)*
4. *Insecurity*
5. *“Everything depends on me”*
6. *Love tied to performance*
7. *“Why does this happen to me?”*

1. *Need to perform well*

Women have a tendency to be more meticulous in what they do. They pay more attention to the details than men and that usually leads to fewer errors and better results. But Because they see all the details they are often less satisfied with what they do themselves. The have have a much more difficult time to “just get the job done” – they need to do it *well*. And this standard is often very high and that keeps them busy in *everything* they do.

To give you an example, I recall that Barbara and I had long disputes about her feeling a need for ironing every piece of clothing after washing it. Men think that in most case this is just wasted time – it’s going to wrinkle immediately anyway. Women have an urge to keep everything neat, even if it costs them long hours of work.

Other examples – to get the message?

So, the point is, there must be a balance between what you feel obliged to do and what you *can* do.

2. *“Everything depends on me”*

Many households are run by a woman with missionary instincts: *If I weren’t here then everything would break down*. This is a very common belief and often adopted by the world around them.

People keep asking me if I am able to survive while Barbara is away. Of course I can. Life is less fun without her but that doesn’t mean that I starve to death or that the household becomes a mess when she’s not here.

But – many women see that differently. They refuse help because they think that their husbands and children can do any meaningful task in the household. So they rule the kitchen and organize the closets and drawers of every member of the family.

Do you know what the result is? They actually *make* their family depend on them. The children grow up in the belief that mommy always runs after them cleaning up and organizing everything. They never learn to organize themselves. So when the time comes to move out they haven't learned anything.

I think here at Cornell we get perfect examples of where this leads to. Student homes are often a mess because now there is no mommy to clean up after them. You wouldn't believe how much chaos and dirt a young person can stand before he or she feels the need to do something. Particularly the young men are terrible. In our department we have a permanent microwave battle. People just heat up their food, take it out and leave – even if they created a mess. They have no idea how disgusting it is for the next person to find a microwave where tomato sauce and pizza cheese is spattered everywhere. They don't even think about this because mother always did the job for them.

Women who make their family depend on them do not only suffer under a lot of stress but will also raise children (and possibly husbands) with no sense for cleanliness, order, or responsibility – and later ask themselves: “What went wrong? I did so much for them and look what has become of them”.

Instead of organizing your household perfectly you better spend some time to help your family members organize themselves. I am thankful that our mother trained us in these things.

3. *Need to prove something*

Some women enter the working arena with a desire to balance the scales of their life. Their sense of self-worth was hurt in the past. So now they must prove that they are worthy in a way for everybody to see. This is their way to get even. But of course, achieving visible success costs an incredible amount of energy.

4. *Love tied to performance*

Many parents make the mistake of withdrawing love from their children when they have done something wrong or not good enough. Children who grow up in such a world start to believe that love is something to be *earned*. “It may be different with God, but people only love me if I perform well”, is the tape they play to themselves over and over again.

If they don't get the attention and affection they need (and that is usually a lot!) they conclude that they are not doing enough. So they try more and more – and it doesn't work. In fact, their husbands may react very strange to their efforts because they see their wives do so many things they don't care about – and have so little time for them as a person.

You see, this way of thinking is a vicious cycle. A woman who gets into this does more and more with less and less results as far as affection is concerned. Her marriage will become quite shallow as far as true emotions are concerned.

Women who tie love to performance probably also have difficulties experiencing the love of God. After all, God gives his love freely without asking us to perform well. But if we hold on to the belief that we must do well to deserve love, we keep all our senses shut for love that does not depend on performance.

5. *“Why does this happen to me?”*

A similar, somewhat more negatively oriented attitude is based on the belief that life should be trouble-free – at least for the Christian. If anything bad happens to a woman who has this attitude, she believes that she must have something wrong.

“Why does this happen to me?” she asks herself. “What have I done wrong to get punished?” People who are often sick or permanently ill can easily fall into this trap if they are not firm in their faith. Jesus says in **Matthew 5:45**:

for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

So we all get our share of bad things from time to time – although some get it a little more often than others. But this is besides the point. The crucial thing is that a woman with that attitude *always* believes that something is wrong with her whenever a tiny raindrop falls into her life. So she is trying to compensate that by doing better and better. This of course leads nowhere.

6. *Insecurity*

We all know that we are not even half as good as we appear on the outside. This is quite normal because it doesn't make sense to let everybody know the bad things we did in the past, all the weaknesses we have, the temptations that still make us fall, the sins we still commit repeatedly, or even the normal failures where we don't achieve what we tried to accomplish. It is sufficient that we know all that. Telling it to everybody else wouldn't encourage them at all.

But sometimes we ask ourselves “what would all these people at church say if they really knew who I am”? Quite a normal question.

But for some women, this question becomes a threat. Which means that they take a lot of efforts to go into hiding. They feel so insecure that they assume that they are “just no good”, and it would be quite painful if others would find that out. So they try to do as many things as possible to please the people around them, so that they think highly enough of them. But they often attempt too much, that is they can't reach all the goals they are setting for themselves. So the feeling of failure increases instead of getting smaller. But instead of seeing the futility of their attempts they try even harder, and harder, and harder

An unsettled conscience adds much more stress to their already busy days and estranges them from God and the people who give them the most support.

Do you recognize yourself in any of these character descriptions?

8.3 How to get out?

Don't give up! None of these situations is helpless. The stress of life can be overcome. And astonishingly enough the way out is almost the same as for all the other types of people we discussed in the past weeks. There is only a tiny shift in the perspective. All you need to do is the following:

1. *Analyze*: What is it I am saying to myself?

To reduce stress you must find out where it comes from. We all talk to ourselves. Our heart always gives comments to everything. Try to listen to these comments consciously. What are they saying? What makes them sound so believable?

Try to recall a recent situation that made you feel angry, nervous, or depressed. What created the problem? And what did you feel at that time.

Once you do that you will find out how little truth there is in many of the things you say to yourselves. It all sounds so plausible when you're IN a situation. But brought to the light of day it is often just a lot of nonsense.

2. *See the truth*: What is God saying about it?

After discovering your self-talk, compare it to the word of God. And you will find out what the truth about these things really is. **Philippians 4:8** states:

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

If we would only follow this line of thought, then we are quickly out of all kinds of problems. Isn't God's opinion about us far more significant than what our boss, husband, children, friends, etc. think about us?

Some of us see this differently and fix their minds only on people, especially those who think little of us, who criticized us, or left some negative impression. But how much has this to do with reality? Don't we just create negative events ourselves because we listen too much to our self-talk than to God's truth?

3. *Confess*: Where are lies ruling my mind?

"Nicely said", you may think, "but how do I get rid of these negative thoughts?"

Well, the first step is to confess them as lies or – to be precise – as *sin*. Sin means deviating from God's truth – confession means getting into agreement with God again. And the result:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (**1.John 1:9**)

God will cleanse us from unrighteousness – and that includes the lies in our self-talk. We *can* replace these wrong thinking patterns by God’s way of thinking:

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. (**2.Cor 10:4–5**)

Working on your mind is the most important area where we have to fight stress. But you should also change your outer circumstances to support that. Here are a few suggestions. Some seem to be obvious, but they are helpful nevertheless.

1. *Enjoy life*

Life is a gift from God and is intended to have a certain amount of fun. Most people don’t have to be told this but some of us, particularly those under stress, appear to believe that enjoying life is something to be avoided. I know that there are extreme religious groups who teach that every kind of pleasure is sin. But there is nothing spiritual about withdrawing from all “earthly pleasure”. In fact, Paul instructs Timothy to

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, *who giveth us richly all things to enjoy* (**1.Timothy 6:17**)

Most people take themselves much too seriously. But we do not serve a God who is opposed to fun. So, don’t wait until all the work is finished – learn to take breaks, rest and enjoy, and to have fun again.

2. *Have self-control / responsibility*

People under pressure seldomly have any control over their own life. It is the outside world that dominates them. But you can change that.

Begin with taking responsibility for the things you *can* control – what you do during the first 15 minutes of your day; what, when, and how much you eat – and actively control what you do. That means – *you* decide what you do or don’t do, not your compulsions or the problems around you.

If you exercise self-control in the small things you will experience that God’s spirit rules your life again, because self-control is one of the fruits of the spirit (**Galatians 5:22–23**). Self control in the bigger things will follow – don’t start with them first.

3. *Set valuable goals*

A lot of our stress comes from the fact that we are running after goals that are not worth to be followed. We get burned out because we work for a bigger house,

try to keep it neat, want to impress neighbors, intend to secure a good life after retirement, and so on. We must ask ourselves, “are these really goals that we *must* achieve?”. Often the answer is no – we find out that these goals come to us from the world around us.

Instead of adapting goals from others, we should set our goals ourselves. Ask yourself in prayer: “At the end of my life – what must I see to know that I have accomplished what God intended me to do?” If we look at our life from this perspective, many things that seem so desperately vital right now, become almost insignificant. If we really do that, many of the goals that put us under a lot of stress will simply disappear.

By the way, prayer is not only talking to God – we must use a lot of our prayer time to listen, that is to have our thoughts guided by him. Some people tend to forget that when they pray.

4. *Practice to say “no”*

Once we have identified our long-term visions, we must learn to live according to them. That means saying *no* to plans and dreams that do not bring us closer to this vision. These plans may be good – but they are not good for *us*. This includes also services in church. Although I believe that every church member should serve actively somewhere in church, that doesn’t mean you should accept every responsibility that is brought to you. Let us make wise decision how we serve.

For women, the need to say no usually begins at home. For instance, it is perfectly all right to have a 12-year old take care of his room, make his own sandwich for lunch, collect his laundry etc., or to ask you husband to take out the garbage, drive the kids to their various activities, and to spend time listening to the problems that are on your heart. After all, you are not the slave of your kids or your husband. And – we mentioned that already – it is good for them to grow up and to learn responsibility.

I know that this is difficult, but if you manage the household and have even a part-time job, you need to spread responsibilities instead of being the family slave.

5. *Let others help you*

When you try out all these steps, it is helpful to take someone else – a friend or your spouse – into confidence and ask for help. Building new habits is easier if you have someone to talk to about the small successes you achieve each day. The chances that you get rid of stress in a shorter amount of time will rise drastically, because

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour.
For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone
when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. (Eccl 4:9–10)