

October 23, 2011

Isaiah 30:15-18 / Psalm 131:1-3 / Isaiah 46:1-7

Swimming for Shore - Escaping the Cultural Current of Busyness

It was hard to know how to approach this message. And the reason is that there are so many different directions I could have gone with it!

Yet on this one thing nearly everyone agrees: The pace of modern day life is too rushed and too fast-paced. In fact, many studies show that more and more people are going to bed exhausted and waking up exhausted. And to compensate for the feeling of being tired, they guzzle down coffee and energy drinks.

Likewise, I can't count the number of times I have heard people say: ***"It seems there just isn't enough time in the week to get everything done that I need to get done."*** (As if God made a mistake by only putting 24 hours into each day!)

So what do I address? The causes of cultural busyness, or the symptoms? What drives and feeds the rapid current of cultural busyness or the effect which that busyness has on us / our health / our family life / our need for relational intimacy and most importantly our spiritual lives?

You see, our culture is like a wide flowing river that engulfs us all. It pervades everything we do, say and think (for better or for worse). It dictates the style of clothes we wear / the foods we eat / the way we organize and structure our day / the things we think are important / and the gadgets we buy (or think we need to have).

And the only way to truly escape all the effects it has on us, or actually get to shore, is to leave the country for good! But even then, it's so ingrained in us that we would take it with us where ever we go.

Because culture is not just something that's "out there," it's also in here. We internalize many cultural values / make compromises with others / and reject still other values. But either way we can't totally escape the effects that culture has in forming who we are.

In that sense, postmodern theorists have a valid point when they say: "We are a product of our culture." Some even say we are entirely a product of our culture, and all the more so if we've never stepped outside our culture for any extended period of time (though I wouldn't go quite that far).

Culture IS like a wide, flowing river (like the Delaware after a good rain) and we are all caught up in its flow. And because we are, it's not always easy to swim to shore -- even when we want to! The speed and immensity of the flow doesn't let us!

It's a life-lesson I learned at 24 years old, when I decided to do something that only one other person in the program I served with in the Dominican Republic had ever done. Tube down a 15 mile stretch of river, that flowed down through the mountains, descending over 1500 feet in that 15 miles -- meaning that at times, the current was very fast and very strong.

And at one point in my descent, I lost hold of my tube, and strong as I thought I was at the time (and back then I was fairly strong!), the sheer volume of water, mixed with the downhill angle of descent, and the rapid flow of the water, and the occasional boulders that caused whirlpools, sucked me down the middle of that river even though I was trying my hardest to swim for shore.

And what did that experience teach me? It taught me that there are some things in life that knowledge, strength and willpower cannot totally over-come. I did get to shore eventually. I even recovered my tube further downstream. But for what seemed like forever I was overpowered by a force far greater and far stronger than my ability to fight it.

It confronted me with the fact that there are forces at work in this world that catch us up in their flow, and make it hard for us to escape them. And I should have known that. After all, I'm a sinner, and sinners are people who like the apostle Paul have to confess that there are times when we don't do the things we want to do and do do the things I don't want to do!

Sin is so strong it frequently wins out -- even over our will power!

Yet my culture had ingrained in me the "You can do anything you put your mind to" mentality. Which, of course, doesn't fit with Scripture at all. That's why sometimes, God must teach us those spiritual truths and spiritual lessons through physical life experiences.

And why do I share that particular life-lesson with you? For two reasons.

1st) Because I believe we must (for our own good, and the good of those around us) swim for shore and get out of that current of busyness.

2ndly) Because I know it's no easy task -- even when we are trying our hardest to do so. It's that strongly ingrained in our culture. And it will only get worse as time goes on.

So, knowing it's by no means easy, let me share some thoughts on how to escape our culture's current of busyness (besides moving to another country, where you would likely bring your culture with you anyway)! Plus, I've heard that some Asian countries, like Japan, are even worse than ours.

FIRST, let me share about the causes of our cultural busyness, before I get to the cures. And in terms of causes, few things play a larger role in creating the atmosphere of busyness than the trend toward an instant society.

One author wrote these insightful words: ***"We want Quickaholic Spirituality. We live in an age of acceleration. In an era so seduced by the instantaneous that we're in the grave danger of losing our ability to wait."***

Modern day life she says, ***"moves at a staggering pace. Computers yield up immediate answers..."*** [We no longer speak in terms of seconds, or hundredths of seconds, but nano-seconds!] ***Satellites beam television signals from practically anywhere, allowing far away images to appear instantly in our living rooms*** [or on our i-phones as we simply walk down the street]. ***Complex life issues are routinely introduced, dealt with and solved in neat thirty-minute segments on television*** [just over twenty if you take commercials into account]. ***In ways large and small, we're all encapsulated in a speeding world. We're surrounded by express lanes, express mail, and express oil changes.*** [We have instant hot water, instant breakfasts, instant credit card approval, instant replay, instant streaming videos, and instant messaging.]

"We don't simply have restaurants, we have fast-food restaurants." [where people get irritated, angry and often treat cashiers rudely if they have to wait more than two minutes for their lunch or dinner order -- as Krista and I witnessed at McDonalds just the other night]!

"Faster is better," she says, **"Just ask anyone... Quick and easy are magical words with enormous seductive powers. Advertisers know that if they put them on a product it sells better...** [People used to diet, and develop self-control, and work out for weeks to lose weight, now they just take a pill and go to sleep]... **Is it any wonder, then, that we're fine-tuned from an early age to seek out the instant fix? We want life to respond like our microwave ovens."**

Yet the rapid pace of life, and the constant stimulation offered by all our time saving gadgets, has wreaked havoc on our souls. It has made us impatient / uneasy with quiet / unable to wait / seekers after instant gratification / unwilling to put up with inconvenience / and hostile to anything that interrupts our jam-packed and precisely laid out schedules.

Likewise, just this week I received my copy of Leadership Magazine, and the first article in this month's magazine was called: "The Isolation Generation." And in it, psychologist Phillip Zimbardo describes the effect that instant streaming gadgets are having on young boys and girls. It's a phenomena he calls, "arousal addiction" or "stimulation addiction."

He says: **"This never-ending stream of stimulation is behind the growing failure of males to connect with women socially or succeed academically. They're dropping out of life... Excessive internet use, video gaming, and online porn are the causes of this new addiction. By the age of 21, boys will spend 10,000 hours** [that is, about a 3 1/2 years of full uninterrupted 8 hour days] **gaming -- two-thirds of that time in total isolation from others."**

And that doesn't even include other computer / internet / cell phone / Ipad / Ipod or Iphone use.

The noise, the bells, the beeps, the buzzers, the feeds, the notices, the pictures, the videos, and the texts, never stop day or night! And that constant stimulation, he says, is one of the major reasons that young people today can't learn in a traditional classroom setting. / It's also why church often seems so boring to them. Because they're addicted to the need for rapid digitally enhanced sight and sound stimulation.

And when it is removed for even short periods of time they feel bored and crave another fix (just like a drug addict craving his next high). / They even go through withdrawal symptoms when it's withheld from them (bringing on irritation, anger and even physical and verbal lashing out).

It's not just something they simply WANT or LIKE. It's something they've become addicted to. It's "the need for speed" (and I don't mean the drug, although it has the same effect as the drug).

And it's not just young people either. It's affected nearly anyone (old or young) who has a computer, cell phone, Iphone or other instant-feed gadget.

And the saddest effect of all is the effect it has had on the spiritual maturity and spiritual vitality of Christians in our nation. WHY? Because it has nudged out / or in some cases totally replaced the most spiritually formative exercise any person can engage in -- **PRAYER**.

As the highway signs remind us: "**Speed Kills.**" And nowhere is that more true than in regard to the effect the internet has had when it comes to spending deep, long, intense, soul-searching, obstacle removing, life-transforming times of prayer.

Even people who used to use those quiet moments of down time at night / or before the kids got up / as an opportunities to pray / now use them to get on the internet, and see what's new / what's trending / what's breaking in the news / or what's come in on their Facebook feed.

In the past I often heard grown children share how they would get up in the morning / or wake up late at night to go to the bathroom / and see their parents praying / or reading their Bibles / or doing their devotions (I am one of them, as I've shared before, and it had a profound effect on me.)

People actually had names for those time. They called them: "The morning hour," "The midnight watch," or "The watches of the night."

But now many children wake up early / or go to bed late / only to see mom or dad gaming / surfing the net / or checking their email and Facebook accounts -- something that can also have a profound effect upon our children in the reverse sense, because it also speaks loudly of what we consider our first or most important priority of the day.

In the past people used to seek and even crave times of communion with God. Now, it seems, they seek and crave updated news feeds from their friends. Nothing terribly bad. Nothing overtly sinful. Just distracting and time consuming, and unfortunately, for both old and young alike, a habit which can be emotionally and psychologically addicting.

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. The need to break our addictions. Our addiction to speed, and the adrenaline rush of always being busy. Our addictions to sensation arousal, on-line gaming, gadget isolation (a love affair between us and our instant streaming gadgets).

Back in the early 1980's (even before video games or the internet revolution) one of my seminary professors told us preachers: ***"How can we claim to have a word from God for other people, if we never slow down long enough to listen for the still small whisper of His voice?"***

And that was 30 years ago! Today he would probably say: ***"How can we claim to have a word from God for others if we never unplug the internet, or shut off our iPhones, or shut down our Facebook accounts for a time, or get rid of all the news feeds that incessantly bombard us with useless, trivial & often insanely mundane information?"***

You see, true, deep, Christian soul-formation takes time. It takes MUCH time spent alone with God. Time where we bring all of our hopes, and fears, and wounds , and desires, and dreams and yearnings before the throne of grace.

Times when we seek to let His light shine into the darkest recesses of our soul / allowing Him to see and expose our sin / shower us in His forgiving love / confirm to us His promises / and speak words of guidance, direction, comfort, challenge or rebuke.

After all, as James Houston writes: ***"We must remember that the goal of prayer is a thoroughly changed and transformed life."***

And that transformational type praying takes time! Large quantities of time. It never happens in an instant. And it will surely never happen so long as we are too busy to spend significant times in prayer.

Excessively busy people will rarely be spiritually deep people, for excessive busyness robs us of the time necessary for in depth prayer.

That's one of the reasons there are so many spiritual casualties and drop outs these days: People are used to the instant fix they get from technology (even addicted to it) and they expect the same from God. But He refuses to comply.

Soul formation takes years, decades -- even our entire lifetime. Always has, and always will. It has to! Because it's purpose is to cultivate in us things like patience, diligence, endurance, long-suffering, perseverance, persistence, tolerance, self-control and personal and spiritual restraint -- all of which would be ruined if God gave in to our desire for instant gratification.

Because, ***"There is nothing instant or automatic in spiritual development,"*** as Alan Jones rightly notes.

Thus we have a choice. We can either break our addiction to technology / or lose our deep and meaningful connection to God. / We can either disconnect or severely restrict our access to the web / or we can say goodbye to soul-transforming prayer.

We can either make the nurture and care of our soul the top priority / or we can let it be overtaken and displaced by all life's distractions, and our carnal desire to feed our stimulation or arousal addiction.

THIRD, we need to renounce the mistaken belief that busyness somehow gives us, or our children, greater worth, meaning or significance. It doesn't! In fact, unlike nowadays, where ones worth is measured by the list of things they've done or accomplished, the Bible (interestingly) is very sparing on such information.

It never tells us how many house churches Peter, James or John planted (and we only know of the ones Paul planted because he wrote letters to them)! We don't know how many people they converted, catechized or baptized. / We don't know how many sermons they preached / Bible studies they led / evangelistic pamphlets they handed out / home visits they made / people they healed / clothes they gave away / or Bibles they gave out.

Unlike many missionary newsletters today where they feel compelled to justify themselves by having and publishing results, the Bible simply doesn't seem to care if it to supplies us with such data.

The need to "produce" is even one of the reasons I frequently had missionaries come to the office of my church in Honduras who confessed to having lost contact with God. They were so busy serving God that they lost all vital, relational, experiential or emotional contact with God.

Yet we are VERY concerned with such data! Why? Because we are under the mistaken impression (spawned, strengthened and enforced by our culture, and NOT the Bible) that our value and worth as people comes how busy we are, how much we do, what we achieve, or how much we accomplish, and NOT from who we are or who we become (in terms of internal godly character).

And here I need to say one of the biggest culprits in creating and sustaining our hurried pace of life / and the belief that our worth depends on our achievements / is the capitalism that drives the economic machine, and has produced for us such great prosperity.

And don't hear me wrong: Capitalism has produced many good things. But it also has a down side -- it is competition driven (often fueling a dog eat dog competition).

A competition that creates the incessant need to stay ahead of the other guy / or outdo the other guy / and even, on occasion, seek to drive the other guy out of business.

And it's that always having to produce or keep ahead of the other guy mind-set that makes us feel that our worth depends on how much we accomplish / achieve / or do in this life.

I know this goes against our culture, and would take years to filter down through the cultural strongholds in many people's minds: But the Bible would say that our worth as an individuals comes from simply being human (a person created in the image of God) / as well as being the objects of His saving love.

It is NOT IN ANY WAY measured by what we achieve / accomplish / or produce in this life -- struggle as we might to believe it.

Billy Graham is just as precious and cherished by God today (in his unproductive and nearly invalid state of old age), as he was in his most productive years, when he regularly filled stadiums all over the globe with 60,000 or more people.

In fact - LISTEN: God would cherish him just as much if he'd never done any of it! It has nothing to do with his value as a person. Do you believe it?

Which brings me to my **LAST** point: We must discipline ourselves to be quiet, stop and rest. One of my favorite verses in the entire Bible is Isaiah 30:15: "***In repentance and rest is your salvation; in quietness and trust is your strength.***" Not coffee! Not energy drinks! Not the adrenalin rush of incessant activity (which IS precisely what the Israelites were putting their trust in, in that passage)! It's in quietly, restfully, trusting God.

"Be still and know that I am God," declares the Lord.

"Let all mortal flesh keep silent before Me," says the Lord.

Why? Because there are some aspects of God's being that we can never come to "know" except in the "stillness" and the "quiet" -- times of reverent, adoring, worshipful, homage to our holy God.

But it's not easy in our hustle bustle society. It takes work to wind down, and say no, and stop working, and turn off all the noise makers, and be prayerfully and reverently still in God's presence. It takes more work than winding up!

Even David had to work at slowing down. But he did, and thus he could write: ***"I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me."*** We need to do it too -- work at winding down to stilled, motionless, reverent, quiet...

And here's the key to it all: We will never truly be able to "swim to shore" / or "escape the cultural current of busyness" / until our desire for communion with God outweighs all those other desires.

Not until we can say with David: ***"One thing I desire of the Lord; this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord... and gaze upon the beauty of the Lord."***

Only then -- when God becomes more beautiful to us than all those other things / and communion with Him is the thing we crave the most / will we make the effort to get out of that current and swim to shore.

Only then will we make it a priority to set aside significant periods of time to be still / and enter into / and feast upon His life-nurturing presence that we might be transformed.