

RESETTING LIFE'S COMPASS

Creating Margins

Isaiah 30:12-18

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The first of January is always fascinating. The whole year stretches before you--like snow that has not been disturbed or walked in. Pure, untouched. Anything is possible. For that matter, each Sunday, we sit here with the whole week stretching before us. Each morning, you have a new 24 hours stretching before us. What will we do with them?

To get at this, we're going to think today about margins. Here's a definition of what I mean. A margin is space where there is nothing, so that the something shows up better. Think about how we learned in elementary school to write on a piece of paper, allowing for margins (what they didn't tell us was that the margins were also so they could write corrections and comments along the edge!). Your laptop has a default setting for certain sized margins, space at the edges where there is nothing. Wouldn't it be nice if life came with automatic margins built in? But there are many kinds of margin settings. A calendar exists to help us set margins. This means that a calendar's primary purpose is not to see how full we can pack it but to protect us with margins. A budget does the same (hopefully). In scripture, the people of God are commanded to keep the margin called Sabbath. It's interesting how many Old Testament prophets railed against the breaking of this commandment as much as the other Big Ten.

Marriages need margins. When couples tell me they don't "feel" in love anymore, I ask them if they are taking margin time, time to play, relax, have fun, date. Churches need margins, too. Gone is the day when we see how full we can fill the church calendar, expecting people to come to the building four nights a week. There is a book out called *Slow Church* (Smith and Pattison, InterVarsity).

This is why we all feel so stressed and anxious. When we don't leave margins, the new, unexpected, unplanned sinks us. Whether it's church, personal calendar or budget or whatever, we have to leave space for the new, the unexpected. Your comments on Facebook were revealing and helpful. So many of us are wrestling with this. And in the interest of full disclosure, I want to be transparent by stating I am not an expert on this topic, but a fellow struggler. I am a recovering workaholic, placing too much value on my work (what I do vs. who I am), addicted to "the buzz of busy." We get hooked on it and we don't want to come down off of it.

I can give you an example. I was asked to judge a high school speech contest. I love doing this. But it was a Friday-Saturday. The old Doyle would have booked that. But that is my margin time. It's not fair to my wife, to myself or to my church to use up all that margin. Andy Stanley has reminded us that without healthy margins, there is no room left to serve. Without margins,

we can't do what we intended to do. We are driven by the trivial. Without margins, we get selfish, we rush, we make poor choices, we don't follow through on important commitments and we get sloppy.

Let me show a picture of a wall that is crumbling. This is what happens when we get sloppy. A badly-built wall carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. The same with a badly-built life. Note what Isaiah says in vv. 12-13. When we don't build into our lives space for God's voice, we become like a break in a high wall. Listen to the words from v. 15: returning, rest, quietness and trust. Note that what Isaiah is contrasting is a life without margins and a life with margins: 1) thoughtless vs. thoughtful; 2) frantic and feverish vs. relaxed; 3) restless and desperate vs. quiet and restful; 4) controlling vs. trusting. In our Isaiah text, the people of God had to learn that their victory was not going to be through their own might but through God. I was startled that so many of the Facebook comments related to priorities, margins, etc., were about personal self-worth and learning to focus on who we are vs. who we are not. We have to let God love us as we are. Drop the shoulds and oughts and learn to live in God's grace. It is a "just because" love. Jesus proved that on the Cross.

So where do we start? Here are some suggestions. 1) Develop a theology of brokenness. Whatever your struggle this morning, just know that God always allow us to begin again. That's v. 15...repentance, returning and rest. 2) Live by the compass, not by the clock (Dr. Bill Wilson, Center for Healthy Churches, has written and talked about this). This means that we are not driven by the human expectations, but by God's purpose and plan, by a higher call of following Jesus.

3) Take one small step today...do something! Don't be paralyzed and don't try too much at once. I was amazed to read about the Erie Canal, which opened in 1825 and connected the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean. It was 360 miles long, forty feet wide...and only four feet deep! But it was deep enough to float barges containing 30 tons of freight! So we don't have to have an ocean depth of theology or psychological insight under us. We don't have to have five websites to motivate us. Just start small. We just need movement! Change something. Free up some tiny margin in your life. And claim the promise: "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. The LORD waits to be gracious to you... blessed are those who wait for him" (vv. 15, 18).