

Initial Insights

To get down to the roots I had to start with the branches. As I studied my life, I gained two unexpected insights. The first was that my procrastinating patterns were highly systematic. They infected every area of my life, and operated in orderly, predictable ways. My heart had its own dysfunctional flow chart of if-thens: *If it's not due tomorrow, then you've got plenty of time. If it's crunch time, then neglect every other responsibility. If you've just finished a big job, reward yourself*, and so on.

Secondly, I realized that I am largely ignorant of this system most of the time. This was hard to take because I've always considered myself an introspective guy, and my procrastination had been on my radar for some time. But I had always defined it as an *absence*: I wasn't working hard enough—or soon enough, at least. The question that hadn't occurred to me was, *If something is absent, then what is present?* Those hours were going somewhere—what exactly was I *doing* with them?

I began paying more attention to the way I spent my time, particularly those hours designated for work. I discovered that I usually did *good* things! I would reorganize my desk, return

letters, balance the checkbook, or practice guitar. Of course, less noble activities were there, too: an hour of TV, scrounging for junk food, shopping on the internet for things I didn't need. But the "good" activities began to explain how I had justified my procrastination as a necessary evil for an overworked guy.

I also began searching Scripture for insights about work. Not surprisingly, I found numerous verses on the necessity of hard work. One passage in particular jumped out at me. Second Thessalonians 3:11 describes a group of *idlers* or *busybodies* who were not pulling their weight in the young church. The word "busybody" intrigued me, so I looked it up in the original Greek. It's a compound of the verb meaning "to work" and a preposition meaning "around." So the second part of verse 11 could be translated literally, "Such people do no work at all; instead, they *work around*."

All of a sudden I saw myself clearly. As I buzzed around the room, the one thing I needed to do most sat unheeded in the middle of it. I wasn't just a procrastinator; I was a work-around-er.

I remembered reading Charles Hummel's little booklet *Tyranny of the Urgent*. Hummel marveled that Jesus could say on the cross,

“It is finished,” even though so much of his kingdom-building work was yet incomplete. Hummel argued that Jesus could say this only because he had done “all the work the Father gave him to do.” The connection to my own sin was clear: Unless I’m doing what *God* has called me to do, I’m doing someone else’s work. When I procrastinate, I’m *meddling* in things that are “none of my business”—like a busy-body.

Digging Deeper

I began to feel like I was really figuring myself out. I’d notice when I started slipping into procrastination, and it was easy enough to stop—at first. But when midterms hit, I found myself pulling all-nighters again, and I was back to square one. Ironically, though, I still had to work on my procrastination for my counseling class. Reluctantly, I dove back in, this time trying to get at the deeper “root” issues.

It wasn’t hard to begin naming things. Pride was surely operating; every time I pulled an all-nighter to finish a job, I was protecting my reputation before my friends and superiors. Fear of others was there too. When I had

those mild panic attacks, the fear of others' disapproval was foremost in my head. Laziness wasn't the main thing, but it definitely played a part; sometimes I just didn't want to do anything. Pleasure-seeking and Escapism were big players, as well, though I generally confined myself to "acceptable" thrills like watching movies and bingeing on Ben & Jerry's ice cream.

Identifying these heart issues didn't produce the catharsis I had hoped for. Not only were they intimidating (*How could I ever put a dent in pride?*), but they were *internal*, and I still suspected that external factors played a key role. Sometimes I really did have unreasonable amounts of work to do. Even when I planned my time responsibly, unexpected events would often force me to work at the last minute. Sometimes this last-minute work was actually pretty good, and when I started other jobs early, they *did* expand to fill the time.

Taking a different tack, I composed a long list of "if onlys"—circumstances that would make everything better if only they changed. My wife's illness was at the top of the list, followed by the financial constraints of being in graduate school, far from family. This was followed by my unsettled vocational future.