

Overcoming Procrastination

*Dreaming instead of doing is foolishness,
and there is ruin in a flood of empty words.*

Ecclesiastes 5:7

I sighed as I read the note at the bottom of the printed rejection slip: “I’m sorry, but we recently purchased a similar manuscript.”

This wasn’t the first time I’d missed out on a sale because I’d waited too long to develop an idea and get it in the mail. Like many writers, I tend to procrastinate. I am a typical Type A personality, an achiever, a true workaholic. Yet when I stop long enough to evaluate my accomplishments, I know that I have not always done, or written, that which is most important in the Lord’s eyes.

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines procrastination: “To put off usually habitually the doing of something that should be done.” While some procrastinate more than others, few of us (if we are honest) can say we never procrastinate. For a myriad of reasons, we put off doing things—especially, it seems, getting words in our head written. It’s no wonder God seems to call a number of people to write similar things. He knows how few will actually finish what they start.

“O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me,” I read in Psalm 139:1. I cannot hide my problem of procrastinating from him, but I can go to him for help to overcome it.

The first step to victory comes by facing the reasons why I procrastinate. Sometimes, to be honest, it’s laziness. Writing is hard

work! It's easier to talk about it than to do it. But since I know writing is the work God has called me to do, I need to do it.

Sometimes I procrastinate because I'm overextended. I have difficulty saying no. All too often my time and energy are drained as I allow my priorities to get out of order. And then there's the "tyranny of the urgent." I'm ruled by my never-ending to-do list that is filled with things that seem to demand my attention but have no eternal significance.

Other times, I procrastinate because of a problem with my will. I know what God has called me to do, but I choose to do what I want. It's not easy for me to discipline myself to stay in my office when it's a beautiful day outside or when a friend calls and wants to chat. Even though I usually win that battle because I enjoy working, I still may not end up accomplishing what God wants me to do.

An editor gave me a go-ahead on a book proposal. I told him I would have the manuscript to him in three months. Then I began procrastinating! I decided I could work more efficiently if I reorganized my files. Then I got sidetracked answering letters and reworking manuscripts that had been sitting around for months. Doing so got me in the mood to market my returned manuscripts. I convinced myself they really should get back in the mail. Before I realized it, a month had passed without even five minutes spent on the book manuscript. Why? The biggest reason I procrastinate is because I'm afraid of failure.

Facing the reasons why I procrastinate doesn't make me feel good, but it is a prerequisite to the second step to victory—confession. My good intentions are not enough. They do not get me off the hook.

Jesus told a parable about a man with two sons (Matt. 21:28-32). He asked both of them to go and work in the vineyard. The first son said he wouldn't, but later he changed his mind and did what his father asked. The second son said he would, but he didn't. Did he deliberately break his word or simply procrastinate?

When God calls something to my attention, it's not what I say I will do that counts—it's what I actually do. "Knowing what is right to

do and then not doing it (this includes procrastination!) is sin” (James 4:17). It is only as I confess this sin and realize my worthlessness before the Lord that he lifts me up, encourages and helps me (James 4:8-10). While some opportunities may be gone forever, God does not leave me in the land of regrets. He redeems the time I’ve lost and gives me another chance (Prov. 28:13).

The third step to victory requires that I risk being open and honest with other Christians—especially other Christian writers. “Admit your faults to one another and pray for each other,” (James 5:16 says. That’s not an easy thing to do. Yet people cannot pray on target for my needs if they don’t know what they are. It has been a tremendous help and encouragement to know that others are praying for me—and holding me accountable to do the things I’ve committed myself to do.

Other steps I have taken to overcome procrastination include memorizing Scripture promises, reexamining my priorities, and making lists. (I’m an endless list maker; but as my husband points out, that doesn’t necessarily mean that what is on my list will ever get done!) I have even used a system of rewards and punishments, “earning” the right to do the things I want to do by first doing the thing I would prefer to put off. Some methods help. Others do not. But I am finding that the most important step after self-examination, confession, and seeking the prayer support of others is such a simple one I often overlook it. At the beginning of each day I need to ask, “Lord, what do you want me to do?”

When I allow the Lord to be Lord of my schedule and my daily to-do list, I am less prone to procrastinate. Minute-by-minute obedience pleases God. It also frees me from the frustration of being torn in different directions by my unrealistic expectations and the resulting burden of guilt. As I leave my schedule to the Lord, he brings order to what would otherwise be chaos and peace to what would otherwise be confusion.

God knows what needs to take priority in my life at any given moment. He shows me those priorities when I stop long enough to ask

him *and* to wait for his response. He may remind me of promises I've made or tasks I've put off that need to be done—today. But what he calls me to do he also equips me to do (1 Cor. 1:7). He *never* asks me to do the impossible.

As I'm learning to be obedient—to be a doer of his Word rather than a procrastinator—exciting things are happening. I'm discovering the joy of being used in his kingdom work in ways I could have easily missed. Just as God made Eric Liddell (of *Chariots of Fire* fame) a runner, God made me a writer. And I feel his pleasure when I write!

RESPONDING TO GOD'S CALL TO WRITE

Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, "There is a right time for everything." This may not be the right time for you to write. But if you have clearly felt God's call to write and you know you are procrastinating, you need to pray, "Cross-examine me, O Lord, . . . test my motives and affections too" (Ps. 26:2). Remembering that God "deserve[s] honesty from the heart; yes, utter sincerity and truthfulness" (Ps. 51:6), answer the following questions.

Why do I procrastinate?

What ideas have I scribbled on a scrap of paper that I know I should be developing?

If I knew Jesus was coming back this week, or this month, or this year, what completed manuscript would I most want to lay at his feet?

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