

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 18, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PROVERBS 16:9

"We should make plans, counting on God to direct us."
(Good News Bible)

PEARLS FROM THE PROVERBS

(3) Surviving My Schedule

Have you ever gotten to the end of a day and say to yourself, "Did I really accomplish anything today?" Have you ever asked yourself, "Where on earth does my time go?" Well, here's the answer. U.S. News & World Report says that in the average lifetime, an American will spend six years eating (some of us a little bit more than that!); five years waiting in line; four years doing housework; two years unsuccessfully returning phone calls; one year looking for misplaced objects; eight months opening junk mail; six months sitting at a stop light! Now that causes stress.

The National Institute of Occupational Safety & Health has released a study which says that executive stress costs the country \$20 billion a year. That's a lot of money.

Is there an antidote to enable you to survive your schedule? Is there a way out of the stress problem? Yes, there is.

The Book of Proverbs gives three keys to reducing the stress of your schedule. Proverbs says that if you want to get control of your schedule:

1. Line up your priorities -- put first things first.
2. Lighten up your attitude -- don't take yourself so seriously.
3. Look up to God -- reverence Him with all your heart.

1. Line up your priorities. Look at Proverbs 17:24 (GN), "An intelligent person aims at wise actions, but a fool starts off in many directions." Have you ever tried to do 30 things at once? Solomon says that a fool, like Don Quixote, jumps on his horse and gallops off in all directions at once!

Folks, let me tell you -- "selection" is the name of the game. Line up your priorities, because you've got to decide what's really important because you just don't have time to do everything. Prov. 12:11 (GN) says, "It is stupid to waste time on useless projects." We've got to learn the difference between "urgent" and "important." You've got to learn the difference between "activity" and "accomplishment." Have you ever caught yourself majoring on the minors? You know, some things are not necessarily wrong: They are just not necessary. So, you've got to major on the majors.

What is the solution? Just this -- line up your priorities. Look at what our text for this morning says, "We should make plans, counting on God to direct us."

Now let me summarize a whole bunch of verses from Proverbs. Proverbs teaches that you ought to think through the direction of your life: You need to plan your life.

It's amazing to me how people write out their last will and testament but they never write out any life objectives or life goals. Now what that means is that they are better prepared for death than they are for living. Solomon says, "You need to plan out your life." Why? Because you're going to live your life either by priorities or by pressures. One of those two things is going to be in control of your life; and if you don't set your agenda, guess what? Somebody else is going to set it for you.

Jesus modelled this. One day He was out praying and the disciples found Him, and they said, "Master, everybody has been looking for You." (Mark 1:35-37) They wanted Him to get back to healing people who were ill. But He said, "No, we're not going to do that. We're going on to another town." He set His priorities.

So, line up your priorities. Do first the things that are urgent and need to be done. Rate yourself. "How clear are my priorities?" You say, "I don't have any. I'm heading off in 50 directions at once!" Give yourself a one. You say, "I've got fuzzy priorities. I make a 'to do' list." Let me give you a time management tip -- make a "don't do" list -- things that you never should do because they're not really important in your life. You say, "I've got a written-out life objective." That puts you in the top 2 percent of the nation. Give yourself a ten. If you've ever sat down and said, "This is what I want to do with my life -- these are the goals I'm aiming to achieve"; you're on your way to a fulfilled life. Line up your priorities. That's the first thing. The second thing Proverbs teaches is,

2. Lighten up your attitude because the Bible teaches that stress is not an event: Stress is an attitude. You can take two people and put them in the exact same situation; one of them is quite relaxed while the other is uptight. It's not the event; it's how you handle it and respond to it.

Prov. 12:25 (Berkeley) says, "Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down." He's saying, "Lighten up! Don't take life so seriously." Jim Irwin, one of the astronauts who went to the moon and is now in full-time Christian ministry, was once asked, "What does it take to be an astronaut?" He said, "Well, first of all, you need an intense desire to get away from it all!" Lighten up your attitude!

You know, humor is a great stress reliever; it's life's shock absorber. I pity a person who does not have a sense of humor; especially a person who cannot laugh at himself. Nothing helps you to lighten up like laughing at yourself because that means that you're not taking yourself too seriously. Humor doesn't change the situation; but it changes your perspective and helps you handle things better.

I heard about a fellow who was late for an appointment, and he drove around the block two or three times and couldn't find a parking space. So, he pulled into a no-parking zone and left a note on his windshield that said, "This is an absolute emergency. I promise I will be back in 15 minutes." He ran into the meeting, made his presentation, eyeing his watch all the time. He was back down to the car in 12 minutes only to find a parking ticket on his windshield. He grabbed it in disgust, and almost swallowed his tonsils when he saw that the traffic cop had written at the bottom of the ticket just three words -- "Take your time!"

I just want to say to all of you -- lighten up! I'm thankful that I've always been able to do that because I believe it has enhanced my health and my joy in ministry. I don't know a more stressed-out area than metropolitan Washington. We all need to remember this verse - - "Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down."

Look at this next verse, Prov. 14:30 (LB), "A relaxed attitude lengthens a man's life." Do you know why "a relaxed attitude" is so important? Because things don't always go as planned. Isn't that true? They don't. And we have to learn to ride with the punches. The first rule of stress management is, "Don't sweat the small stuff." Rule number two -- "It's all small stuff"! It is all "small stuff" in God's eyes.

But someone says, "Pastor, if you had my problems, you wouldn't be able to relax." Maybe not, but I believe we all need to practice what I would call "relaxed concern." Jesus modelled it. He was never in a hurry. His first public recorded words at the age of 12 were, "I must be about My Father's business." (Luke 2:49 MV) He had an overarching purpose for His life at age 12. Some of His last recorded words at age 33 were, "It is finished." (John 19:30) Now when He said, "It is finished," had Jesus healed everybody? Had He saved everybody? Had everybody been fed? No. In fact He said, "The poor you will always have with you." (Matthew 26:11) But He said in His great high-priestly prayer in the Upper Room the night before He was crucified, "Father, I have brought You glory on earth by completing everything You told Me to do." (John 17:4) He had a "relaxed concern." A relaxed attitude lengthens a man's life." Now I'm not talking about callousness. I'm just saying, "Do your best and leave the results to God."

Now look at this verse, Proverbs 17:22 (GN), "Being cheerful keeps you healthy. It is a slow death to be gloomy all the time." Isn't that a great verse? He says, "Line up your priorities, and then lighten up your attitude." It has been said that a pessimist is a person who, when faced with two evils, chooses both!

Medical research confirms the fact that being cheerful keeps you healthy. Do you know that there are positive chemical changes that take place in your brain when you smile or laugh? It produces cells that increase immunity from disease; it produces endorphins which are the body's pain killer. Your entire muscular system relaxes. Have you ever laughed so hard that you actually grew weak? It relaxes you! You need to be able to see humor in life. Instead of getting into a frenzy over that jerk on the Beltway, laugh at his

stupidity! Do you know what Plato said? He said that "life should be lived as play."
(Maybe that's why they called him Plato!)

Now I hear people say all the time, "Pastor, I find it hard to relax and play. You don't know the tension I'm under at work. You don't know the tension I'm under at school. You don't know the tension I'm under with my marriage and my family. I'll relax and play when I feel better." The fact is, when you play, you will feel better.

Have you ever heard someone say when they're encountering some trial, "Someday, I'm going to look back on this, and I'm going to laugh!" Have you ever heard that? When I hear that, I want to say, "Why wait? Why not do it right now? Laugh now!"

Employers -- have a relaxed attitude with your people. Do you know that when people are having fun they're more productive? They build camaraderie. You need to learn to lighten up because two of the greatest causes of stress are:

- (a) You try to do too much. You don't line up your priorities: and
- (b) You take yourself too seriously.

So, practice what we might call "creative loafing." Take little mini-vacations; some of them lasting only for a day or two. Rate yourself on this one -- How positive is my attitude? Have I been laughing and playing enough? Rate yourself on that. So, line up your priorities; lighten up your attitude; and then Solomon says, if you want to relieve the stress in your schedule.

3. Look up to God. Look at Proverbs 10:27 (LB), "Reverence for God adds hours to each day." Isn't that a great promise? Are you stressed out because of your schedule? Reverence for God adds hours to each day. It's very important to know this because stress is simply a warning light. Whenever I get stressed out, it just means that I've taken my eyes off the Lord. It means that I've started looking at something else -- I'm looking at the circumstance instead of looking at the Lord.

Some of you are saying, "Pastor, I need more time to do the things that must be done." God says, "No, you don't. You need more time with Me." You don't need more time. God gives each one of us the same amount of time -- 168 hours a week - 10,080 minutes -- 604,800 seconds. What you and I need is more time with God because that's what expands your day.

It's like tithing. I believe that if I give the first 10 percent to God, somehow God will see to it that I live better on the remaining 90 percent than if I lived on my total salary. And when I give part of my time back to the Lord in a daily Quiet Time of prayer and Bible reading, somehow, He expands the rest of the day.

"Reverence for God adds hours to each day." Circle that word "reverence." What does reverence mean? It means to take God seriously.

Now let me sum up the whole message in two sentences. This is what I want to say to you today -- The reason you get stressed out because of your schedule is because:

- (a) You take yourself too seriously; and
- (b) You don't take God seriously enough.

That's why you experience such stress and pressure.

Look at Prov. 14:26 (GN), "Reverence for God gives a man deep strength." Isn't that a great verse? Martin Luther once said, "I'm so busy today that I've got to pray at least three hours!" He had his priorities right.

Are you making time to get to know God? I'm not saying, are you "taking" time, I'm saying "making" time. You may say, "I don't have time to pray every day and read the Bible." Then you're just too busy. When you study the life of Jesus, you see that no matter how busy He was, He took the time to pray. "Reverence for God gives a man deep strength." A daily Quiet Time is a great decompression chamber -- a de-stressor. Why? One of the reasons is that we become like the people we spend the most time with. Who are you spending the most time with? I'm afraid some Christians spend more time with the soaps or with rock stars than with the Lord! But remember -- you become like the people you spend the most time with.

Look at Proverbs 3:5-6 (LB), "Trust the Lord completely... in everything you do put God first, and He will direct you, and crown your efforts with success." What do you have your eyes on? One of the sources of stress is indecision; and this verse says that if you trust God, He will always point you in the right direction. Instead of looking to the Lord, are you looking exclusively at your problems? Corrie ten Boom used to say that if you look at the world, you will be distressed; if you look within yourself, you'll be depressed, but if you look at Christ, you will be at rest. You see, it depends upon what you have your eyes focused on. What are you looking at? The circumstance or the One Who overcomes the circumstances? "Put God first in every area of your life, and He will direct you."

Now what am I saying? I'm saying that you can take this message home with you and you can pray these three points every day. When you get up in the morning and have your quiet time of prayer and Bible reading, you can say, "Lord, today, help me to line up my priorities and do first things first. Help me to lighten up my attitude, and not take myself too seriously. And above all, help me to look up to You and reverence You and take You seriously -- putting You first in my life." Watch the difference it will make.

Now let's wrap it up. Look at this question that Jesus asked in Mark 8:37, "What will a man give in exchange for his soul?" Folks, this is the heart of time management, right here. This is one of the most important questions Jesus ever asked -- "What will a man give in exchange for his soul?" Every day you're exchanging your life for something. You may think your most important asset is your money. It's not; it's your time. Money can come and go; and you can make it again; but you have only a limited number of hours; and your time is your life; and every time you give your time away, you never get it back. You can waste it

or spend it or you can invest it. The best use of your life is to invest it in something that's going to outlast it. "What will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

I ask myself that all the time. What am I giving my life for? What are you giving your life for? You see, you have just enough time to do the will of God; so, you need to ask yourself every time you do something, every time you invest your time in something -- "Is this worth my life?" -- because that's what you're giving it for. Is this worth a segment of my life, be it 30 minutes, one hour, or a day or a year of my life?

Ralph Sockman once said, "Give the best you have, to the highest you know, and do it now!"

So, what are you giving your life for? More important still -- Who are you living for? You see, if you tell me Who you're living for, I'll tell you how much stress you have in your life!

Really, the issue is not that your schedule is out of control. The issue is that your life is out of control if you don't have it controlled by the One Who created you. You were not made to live apart from your God and Savior. You were made in such a way that God should manage your life; that Jesus Christ should be your Lord. One of the things Christ brings into focus is your time -- along with your money, your relationships, your future, and everything else. That's what life is all about.

- So, you need to line up your priorities and put first things first;
- You need to lighten up your attitude;
- But most of all, you need to look up to God because reverence for the Lord adds hours to each day.

Many of you have had a tough week and you're stressed out. Jesus said it like this -- "Come unto Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." That's the best news that you and I could ever hear, isn't it?

AMEN.