



Setting Priorities

by Tim Wesemann

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Too Much to Do – Too Little Time.)

My “To-Do” List

- Take car to dealer—turn signal on the blink.
- Got milk? No! Get milk!
- Power lunch with Roberto and Judy.
- Power company coming between noon and 5:00 ... maybe.
- Jen’s gymnastics in gym at 4:00.
- Art’s art class at 5:00.
- Get hair cut.
- Get dog’s hair cut.
- Call vet about cat’s hairballs.
- Ball field report for committee past due, as are library books, as is a visit to the nursing home to see grandma.
- Return calls to the butcher, baker and candlestick maker.
- Make sure Bill pays the bills.
- Buy new pen because this one is running out of . . .

Argh! There’s far too much to do and far too little time to get it all done! But don’t throw your arms up in disgust! I’m here to tell you there’s hope! Things can change! You can change—even if you’re reading this while changing diapers, outfits, or even if you’re busy changing your mind!

There are several issues regarding this dilemma that we should look at together. One is the pace of our lives. Another is setting priorities. The third is organization.

Basket-Case Pace

If you're like me—and most of the world, for that matter—the pace of life is frantic! And we seem to keep making it worse! At this pace, we're going to be a nation of basket-case people, if we aren't already!

At times, it looks like the circus is in town: Computers. Laptops. Internet. E-mail. Cell phones. Pagers. School. Work. Evening meetings. Sporting events. Social schedule. Conferences. Planes, trains and automobiles. Credit cards. Shopping online, off-line, and while standing in lines. Movies, DVDs and CDs. Stocks, bonds and mutual funds.

And so much more! Having so many toys and options in our lives may certainly have its benefits, but it can also put us on the fast track to over-booked days and under-caring people.

We put pressure on ourselves to not only keep up with the Joneses but the entire neighborhood, if not the entire community! Many parents feel so guilty for not being able to spend more time with their children that they give them more toys and options, which only make their lives more hectic—and usually their children aren't any happier or better off for it. Going deeper and deeper into debt makes us even busier as we frantically search for ways to pay it off. In the meantime, we can't enjoy the things we borrowed the money to buy!

It's easy to get our hearts racing just thinking about it all! Let's take a break, and take a closer look at this monster you and I have created. You may find that you have to join me in doing an about-face about pace!

An About-Face about Pace

- ***The first thing we need to remember is that we choose the pace of our lives.*** If our lives are hectic, there is no one to blame but us. And if we have chosen to allow our lives to get crazy, then we must be the ones to make the decisions that can slow down the pace.
- ***Too often we conform to the culture instead of trying to transform it through a healthier pace.*** Who died and put the culture in charge of our lives? Saying “no” to the world's agenda and pace is a good start to instigating our own change of pace.
- ***Then comes the aspect of greed. We crave, want, need, and covet too much.*** And we find those desires turning up the speed on our daily track through life.

Remember that there's nothing wrong with getting off the merry-go-round. There are plenty of other fun things to do and see. Besides, it's probably making you dizzy—going round and round and round. Up and down. Same scenery. Step off ... you'll be amazed at what you've missed!

If it's tough getting a realistic view of just how hectic your world may or may not be, it can be helpful to ask someone who knows you well. It's good to seek counsel, but it's not good to do comparison shopping—seeing how your pace, your priorities, and the organization of your life compare to that of someone else. Keep in mind that each one of us is dealing with different situations in our lives and have been blessed with different gifts and talents.

Finally, in regard to the pace of your life, set priorities and allow them to direct your decisions.

Setting priorities isn't always the easiest of tasks. Sometimes, it's not easy because we've taken on such a hectic pace—we don't know what is right and wrong anymore, or we can't find time to set priorities, or we don't think prioritizing is a priority!

So ... let's get started. Let's take a look at some approaches to prioritizing.

Priority Approaches

A priority can be classified as something (or someone) you value and rank accordingly. The ideal would be that the way we spend our time is closely tied to the way we rank our priorities. But, is this always the case? If someone were to look at how we spend our time, would they be able to accurately assess what we value the most? If not, it's time to take a careful look at how we prioritize.

People seem to take different approaches when it comes to prioritizing. The way we approach the various details of our lives may vary, but people usually follow a pattern. Often, the way we respond to situations can be traced back to what we learned about priority approaches from our family of origin. But that doesn't mean we can't change, if change is necessary or beneficial. It can be a tough battle, to be sure. But even the toughest struggle begins with a single step!

To help us get started, I decided to hang a name on five different approaches to prioritizing. (They all start with the letter *F* for ease of remembering. Okay, I did it for the sake of *Fun!*)

As you read through these approaches, think about which one you find most familiar. (Note that you might find yourself jumping from one to the other.)

Fisherman

We have the laid-back fisherman and the serious fisherman, both of which fall into this category. The laid-back fisherman is excited about the challenges of the day, but has no idea what he'll accomplish. He may or may not have hope that his day will be successful. Looking into Vision Lake, he realizes that he may value catching fish, but if he doesn't catch any, it won't be a great loss. He may not even know what his priorities are as they swim below him in murky waters. He casts a line with a hit-or-miss, laid-back attitude about what he might hook onto—a big project or a throw back. The more serious fisherman may value the adventure and challenge. He rates the unexpected things that come his way highly.

This fisherman approach—whether laid-back or serious—is the one used most by those who don't get uptight about deadlines and consider “enjoying life” a top priority.

Freelance Writer

The freelance writer approaches prioritizing by writing and writing and writing, with an emphasis on “free.” This person has lists everywhere ... lists on paper, computers, or palm-pilots with everything from groceries, homework for the kids, people to call, work assignments, volunteer activities, and even lists about lists. Making lists may be of great help when organizing and setting priorities, but it is also easy to make a list and check it twice, then set it down without accomplishing much because it looks too overwhelming.

Where do you start? Will the lists ever end? If you take this approach, you may have the desire to set priorities (as seen by all your writing of lists) but may not always act on them. Or it could be that your priorities change drastically from day to day. One moment you feel this project is a priority; the next day you've moved on to something else.

This approach can be very helpful for deciding what is the highest priority, checking it off the list when it's accomplished, and moving on to the next item. And some who take this approach may have fun by rewarding themselves in a small way after a certain number of projects are accomplished.

Football Player

The football player values a sense of accomplishment (as well as being admired for what he has done). He knows what needs to be done and tackles everything in sight. He's highly motivated; he knows his priorities and goes after them. But at times, the football player may find himself running after things he can't catch. For those who take this approach, remember to stand back for a moment before tackling a project or deciding on your priorities. Even football players take time-outs and rest on the sidelines during the game.

Firefighter

Probably all of us have had our plans and priorities thrown out of whack by an unexpected problem here or an emergency there. As a result, we throw on firefighting gear and spend more time putting out the emergency fires caused by others than fanning into flame a passion to prioritize and give attention to our own goals. By the end of the day, the personal plans of the firefighter received little or no attention ... but plenty of fires were put out. It's wonderful to have compassion, but sometimes firefighters are taken advantage of or are called upon to respond to false alarms. Those who find themselves taking the firefighter approach often place the needs of others before their own.

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As I reflected on the previous four approaches, I realized that I use a bit of each. Each one has both positive and negative qualities:

- The fisherman isn't the most motivated, yet he doesn't seem to get ruffled, or at least doesn't allow himself to panic about not having enough time to do it all.
- Making lists, like the freelance writer, can be a helpful way to prioritize, get organized, and get something accomplished. But lists can also be overwhelming, and guilt can set in when everything on the list does not get accomplished.
- The football player tackles projects, but he can easily get worn out and even disoriented at times from taking on too much!
- And while the firefighter has a wonderful heart, he may spend more time putting out the fires others have started and getting nothing accomplished in his own world.

So, what's a person to do?

As I was wracking my brain about these approaches to priorities, I began to get hungry and this became a priority! (This isn't rare, by the way.) I decided to take a break from writing (books and to-do lists) and get something to eat. I was craving breakfast food, but my refrigerator had a vacancy sign in the bacon-and-eggs compartment. It was 2 a.m. in the morning.

I got in my car and headed to one of those classic all-night grills, specializing in breakfast any time of the day or night. I took a front-row seat, across the counter from the fry cook.

There I was in the middle of the night, in the middle of a diner, trying to satisfy the middle of my stomach, when I realized I was in the middle of getting a lesson in prioritizing—which leads me to the fifth approach.

## Fry Cook

Here was a man who had his priorities in order and was a great manager of his time. His pace wasn't hectic, even though he had plenty to do. I'm sure it took some time and training before he had everything so nicely prioritized, but this young man (who was probably making minimum wage and working ridiculous hours) should be on a speaking circuit, teaching others how to set and attain priorities.

Here are some of the things I noted about this prioritized, short-order fry cook:

- Everything was organized. There was a place for everything and everything was in its place. And Mr. Fry Cook knew where everything was located.
- His notes were in plain view (the orders hung from a row right in front of him), in a specific order. He seemed to be a person of order who stuck to it for the sake of a smooth and proper day.
- He prioritized what needed to be done first, second, and so on. He knew my hash browns would take longer than my eggs, so he started them first, making certain everything would be finished at the same time. Looking ahead on his lists (orders), he noted an order for steak and eggs. The steak would take longer to prepare. Even though it was not the first order waiting, he put the steak on the grill, so when it was time for the rest of the order, the steak would be finished.

- Instead of making four different trips to the refrigerator, he took a mental note of everything he needed and made one trip, tackling many items at once.
- And he was prepared in case a fire unexpectedly started; ready to put it out quickly—before it caused a problem, and without taking much time.

Although some orders were small and some were big, Mr. Fry Cook took them in stride, staying cool, calm and collected. He never seemed to panic because things were in order and under control. He applied the best qualities from each of the priority approaches, making a plan that worked efficiently. I, for one, was impressed.

As I eased my hunger pangs with the food Mr. Fry Cook prepared, I began to wonder what made him tick. What motivated him to get his act together? It could be personal motivation to do a good job for his employer. Or it could be as simple as a wanting to earn his paycheck. There could be a variety of motivators, just as it is in our lives.

Then, while chewing on a piece of bacon, I thought, “What motivates me to get my act together?” Then it hit me—my motivation isn’t a “what,” but a “whom.” He’s the one who created the 24 hours in a day and the seven days in a week. He’s the one who created me and gives me a life to live every, single day. He is my God, my Savior, my Lord. His name is Jesus Christ. Without Him I wouldn’t have all the blessings in my life that need to be prioritized. And that’s not only my story but yours, too!

Mr. Fry Cook probably had some training. Perhaps he was raised in a very organized home, or he may have learned these skills from someone who worked there before him, or from his boss. Hopefully, this booklet will be a guide for you.

What follows are strategies you can use that will help you put order, clarity and organization into your life.

## Top Ten Tips for Organizing and Setting Priorities

If you are floundering in regards to getting organized and setting priorities—on a large or small scale—here’s what I suggest:

1. Reread the five approaches to prioritizing and determine which one best fits you. Write down what works well in that approach and what you’d like to change. Throw out that which hasn’t worked in the past and brainstorm ways you can improve. For example, you may be a firefighter, always putting out fires started by others. You like how it makes you feel needed, but you feel frustrated as you fall further behind. So you make a resolution to request everyone to put his or her needs in writing; in turn, you respond in writing with a deadline for putting out the fire after you have ranked its importance. *Special note: This may be tough at first because we are creatures of habit!*
2. Make a list of the most important people and things in your life, and then rank what you hope to accomplish with these in mind. This may be the most difficult aspect of prioritizing as we often let what is most demanding outrank that which is most important. Pastor and author, John Ortberg, uses the acronym W.A.M.M. as a guideline: **W**hat **A**ctivities **M**atter **M**ost? Consider which activities are good and which are best. Move on from there ... best should win out over good. Which is best—your fourth- grader’s soccer game or the monthly report? What can you do differently next month to make sure the report does not interfere with the soccer schedule?
3. Expect the unexpected. Don’t let unplanned experiences ruin your day. See them as opportunities for helping others or for personal growth. Trip down the steps hurrying to your next appointment? A sprained ankle can wreak havoc, or it can help you learn to delegate responsibility to others.
4. Be realistic when setting your goals. Don’t set them so high that you’ll be disappointed if you don’t attain them. Perhaps you set a goal to exercise every day, but discover that your refrigerator needs restocking? Maybe you need to re-set your goal to exercise every other day, so that you can take care of errands on the off-days, thus avoiding the tendency to beat yourself up over the missed goal.
5. Take time to learn from others who seem to have their priorities in order. Talk to them, read their materials, and observe how they do it. Seek their counsel, but remember to avoid comparing your life or priorities to theirs. After all, we all have different life situations and our personal “wiring” is different.

6. Spend a few minutes at the beginning of the day to organize your thoughts, goals and tasks. Keep in mind that to-do list can be a great way to get organized—just remember to make the goals attainable and match them to what is most important. Is it realistic to do 20 things, or would it be better to whittle that list to an attainable and meaningful 10? Making this effort can save lots of time (and even some headaches) over the course of a single day.
7. There's no need to make everyday tasks more complicated than they need to be! Set regular routines and work other goals around them. Break larger tasks into smaller steps. Don't try to do too much at once—do one thing at a time so you can do it well. Keep things simple and learn the most effective ways to handle them.
8. Rid yourself of the junk in your life. (And by junk I don't just mean tangible things.) It could be time to de-clutter the tangible junk that makes you feel overwhelmed—one room or closet at a time. And while you are doing that, think about the unnecessary things that are taking up extra room in your life—old hurts, bad habits, worries, etc. Maybe it's time to do without!
9. Take time to realize there are only 24 hours in a day, which need to include time for relationships, working, playing, relaxing and sleeping. If you can't find enough time for everything, either your life is too full or you are not organizing things in the most efficient way. Is it really necessary to volunteer for every fundraiser your favorite charity hosts? Too many tasks at work to get done in one day? Maybe you can take a look at the tasks for an entire week and find a more efficient way to approach them.
10. Know your strengths and your limitations, and don't let others control your actions and decisions according to “who” or “what” they think you should be. Earlier I mentioned that I know the One who created me—the One who knows me even better than I know myself. And He created me with a plan in mind. It's as if you and I are part of God's cosmic to-do list. And according to motivational speaker C. McNair Wilson: “Only YOU can do YOU; if you don't do YOU, YOU doesn't get done.”

## Wrapping It Up

Well ... now it's time to put it all together. So here's another *F* list to help wrap things up. Use these as your *A* list for Pacing, Prioritizing and Organizing:

### Forget the Old Ways

If your priorities are out of whack, throw out your old ways. Deciding what is out of whack may include realizing (or maybe noting what someone else has shared with you) that the things you value, your pace of life, or your attitudes are not healthy or appropriate. Are your actions hurting others? Are you dissatisfied with the ways things are presently going? If not, then decide to move forward.

### Fresh Start

Determine that you are going to make a fresh start in setting priorities. Seek the help of family and friends. Let them also serve as your accountability team to keep you from going back to your old ways.

### Fearless Outlook

Don't panic if you don't get everything accomplished. Forgive yourself if you mess up! And ask for forgiveness if you've caused someone else a problem because your priorities have gotten out of whack.

## Fulfillment

Enjoy the fulfillment you find in ...

- 1) spending more time with the people that mean the most to you;
- 2) not beating yourself up when you don't get everything accomplished (many things can wait until another day);
- 3) learning to enjoy the time God has blessed you with, rather than rushing through a chaotic life;
- 4) asking God to help you learn to be content no matter the situation.

## And Finally ... Freedom!

As I was driving home from my late-night/early-morning breakfast, I saw a sign in front of a church. It read, "Did you know that you are God's number-one priority?" A smile showed up on my face. All this talk about priorities and here was a sign reminding me of God's priority list. I am right there on the top of His list. Your name is there, too. God, through His Son Jesus Christ, wants to make sure we know that He offers complete acceptance and love—which includes free forgiveness—and the gift of heaven for all who believe. Jesus did it all for us—He gave His life on the cross and rose from the dead so we can have a life of freedom forever. And it's a free gift. It's on the top of God's priority list for each of us!

His love frees us up to live a new life *for Him*. I don't know about you, but that leads me to want to respond in gratitude to His undeserved forgiveness, the gift of heaven, and all His blessings. I want HIM to be my number-one priority! That will affect how I pace my life, my approaches to priorities, and how I organize the life God has blessed me with!

If you want to learn more about how and why you are number one on God's priority list (and about His free forgiveness and free gift of heaven), contact Lutheran Hour Ministries toll-free at 1-800-876-9880. They have a variety of free materials and would be happy to connect you with a Christian church in your area. I encourage you to put that on top of today's list of priorities!

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Need some words of encouragement? Here are some of my favorites—and where you can find them in the Bible.

(Jesus said) "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5).

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake" (Psalm 23:1-3).

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1).

"I can do everything through Him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13).

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

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