

Putting off Procrastination



BY WALTER HENEGAR

I procrastinate. I've been doing it most of my life. If a particular task is even remotely unpleasant, my first and persistent tendency is to put it off. It's not that I'm lazy; I'm actually very busy. I just wait as long as possible to do the really hard stuff. I always pull it off in the end, but it regularly makes me miserable.

Beating this habit is not about polishing my halo. My procrastination is a serious, deep-rooted pathology that negatively affects almost every area of my life, only it happens to be acceptable in our culture. For much of my life, I've even been perversely prideful about it.

But over the past couple of years, God has graciously given me the faith, insight, and power to fight it. My procrastinating desires are still strong and seductive, but by God's goodness and grace, I am changing. Writing this article is an attempt to share the hope I have been given.

A Procrastinator's Story

"Pressure makes diamonds." That was my personal motto in college, when I first began to recognize the pattern. I started most of my papers the night before they were due, and I usually got As. My friends all teased me about

it, but I defended myself with an old saying called Parkinson's Law: "Work expands to fill the time available for its completion." *Why spend a week on a paper if I could spend a night and get the same result?*

The working world only reinforced my pattern. Sitting in front of a computer screen all day offered limitless opportunities for procrastinating: e-mail, Internet, mindless little games like *Minesweeper*. As long as I was busy doing *something*, no one would complain if I pulled off the big jobs at the last possible minute. I had a few close scrapes, but I was generally a valued (or overvalued) employee.

When I got married, my uncle, who married us, joked about my well-known tendency right in the middle of the ceremony. His sermon was about the necessity of change in marriage, and looking right at me, he said, "One who is a procrastinator, if he gets over it, will put that off as long as he can."

And that's exactly what I did, though married life made it increasingly more difficult. My designated crunch times now belonged to my wife as well, and I had to push her away to get last-minute work done. Even worse, I began dragging my feet about some of our shared responsibilities, like creating (and sticking to) a budget, praying together, and washing the dishes. Instead of pride, I began to feel ashamed. Or perhaps I should say, defensive. *I mean, everyone knows I'm a responsible guy. This is just*

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a quirk of my personality, right? Can't she just cut me some slack?

She did cut me some slack, but only as much as her chronically ill body would allow. Repeated hospital stays and constant bouts with pain forced her to lean heavily on me to take care of her—and our two children. If marriage is God's cold chisel for sanctifying us, then children only sharpen the edge. The three of them drove my work responsibilities deeper into my free time and farther into the hours of the night. I slept less and less. I still managed to pull most things off, but the quality of my work suffered, and my list of un-done to-do's grew. I was continually weary, discouraged, and feeling sorry for myself. A couple of times, in the throes of last-minute working, I even experienced something like panic attacks. I envied my more disciplined friends but saw little hope of becoming like them.

Then about two years ago, a counseling class in seminary challenged me to give Scripture a shot at diagnosing my problem and setting a course for change. What captured my imagination was the biblical metaphor of a tree, and the suggestion that my prickly branches of procrastination were being nourished by unseen roots growing deep in the chambers of my heart. A hope even flashed that I might uncover *the* root, and somehow cut it out once and for all. In retrospect, this second hope was a reflection of my procrastinator's heart, always looking for a shortcut or a silver bullet.

Initial Insights

In order to get down to the roots I had to start with the branches, and my self-study soon yielded two unexpected insights. The first was that my procrastinating patterns were highly *systematic*; that is, not only infecting all areas of my life, but operating in orderly, predictable ways. My heart seemed to have its own dysfunctional flow chart of if-thens: If it's not due tomorrow, you've got plenty of time...If it's crunch time, 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 the system most of the time. This one was hard to take because I've always considered myself an introspective guy, and my

procrastination had been on the 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's *present*? All of those hours were going somewhere, but what exactly was I *doing* with them?

I began deliberately paying more attention to the way I spent my time, particularly those hours designated for work. And I discovered that most of the time, I did good things! I would reorganize my desk, return letters, balance the checkbook, or practice the guitar. Of course there were less noble activities scattered in there, too: an hour or more of TV, scrounging for junk food, window 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.

During that time I was also searching Scripture for insights about work. Not surprisingly, there are numerous verses on the necessity of hard work. One, in particular, jumped out at me: 2 Thessalonians 3:11 describes a group of *idlers* or *busybodies* who were not pulling their weight in the young Thessalonian church. The word "busybody" intrigued me, so I looked it up in the original Greek. It turns out that it's actually a compound of the verb meaning "to work" and a preposition meaning "around." So the second part of the verse could be translated literally: "Such people do no work at all; instead, they work *around*."

All of a sudden I could see myself clearly. There I was, buzzing diligently around the room, while that thing, 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 Charlie 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. He argued that Jesus could only say it 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 effectively *meddling* in things that are "none of my business"—much like the common definition of a busybody.

Digging Deeper

I began to feel like I was really figuring myself out, and it was still early enough in the semester to think I was staying on top of things. I'd notice when I started slipping blatantly into procrastination, and it was easy enough to stop—at first. But soon midterms hit, and everything quickly fell apart. I found myself pulling all-nighters again, and it was back at square one. Ironically, though, I still had to work on an assignment for my counseling class. I reluctantly dove back, this time trying to get at deeper 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 closely related. 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, too, though I generally confined myself to acceptable thrills like watching movies and binging on Ben & Jerry's.

Naming these heart-issues seemed useful, but it didn't produce the catharsis I had sought. 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 out my time, unexpected events would often force me to work at the last minute. Sometimes my last-minute work was actually pretty good, and when I started other jobs early [like this article!], they really did expand to fill the time.

Turning my attention outside of myself, I easily composed a long list of "if onlys"—circumstances that would make it all 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, followed by the geographic and vocational unsettled-ness of our situation.

The list kept growing. "As soon as our daughter sleeps through the night, or finishes teething, or gets out of diapers—then I'll have time to start exercising again." "When we stop traveling so often and get into a routine, then I'll be able to begin my days in prayer." "I'd be a much more disciplined guy, if I only had a mentor to show me how."

Then the really sinister ones started to emerge. "If my wife were more disciplined herself, I'd have less to do around the house." "If my friends cared enough to grill me about this stuff, I wouldn't struggle with it so much." "If my parents had modeled better work habits for me, I'd be light-years ahead by now."

Finally I uncovered a similar list of excuses that characterized the way I work. "I just need to get this out of my system, and then I'll buckle down." "This semester is already a wash, so I'll work on that next semester when I've got a clean slate." "The first of the month should be a good time to start that." "I'll just set my alarm and do it in the morning."

Ugh! Now those broad categories like pride and escapism were taking on specific contours, and it wasn't pretty. I started seeing my foolishness, rationalizing, and self-deception everywhere. I began to despair, though I still clung vainly to the hope that things might get better, if only I could get my head on straight.

Theological Truths

My head still did need straightening, but now it was theological. Yet, thank God that He did not leave me alone with my Bible, or I would not have gotten far. Through the words of my professors, the writings of others, and the preaching of my pastor, I began to confront my lack of confidence in some essential truths of the Christian faith.

The most significant was my tendency to doubt that God could change me at all, which itself was an expression of my pride. I didn't really doubt my salvation; I just doubted that much change was possible this side of heaven. If there was an "old man" and a "new man" inside of me, the old man clearly had the advantage.¹

¹See Colossians 3:9.

But that simply was not true. I was reminded that the New Testament repeatedly characterizes salvation as a decisive shift from death to life, from slavery to sonship.² While the "tree" of my life will always grow some thorns, I am fundamentally a *fruit* tree. In Christ I have been genetically re-engineered to produce the fruits of the Spirit—and self-control is one of them!³

Lest I then resort to shallow triumphalism (as I am prone to do), I was also reminded that in Scripture, sanctification is a thoroughly *progressive* reality. I always *said* I believed it—"nobody's perfect" is a self-evident truth in any culture—but in practice I still *expected* to be more sanctified right away. My continual longing for a silver bullet to slay my sin exposed the impatience and laziness of my unbelief in progressive sanctification.

As I recognized my unbelief in these areas, the question now became, "What do I do with it?" And the unmistakable answer was, "Repent." My seminary studies had already begun teaching me that repentance was a gracious gift and a joyful essential of the Christian life. But now, instead of just repenting of clearly definable acts of sin, I also began repenting of general *attitudes* and dispositions in my heart.

There was no shortage of these, particularly as I uncovered new ways that I rationalized and clung to my procrastinating habits. It still wasn't pleasant, but I wasn't afraid of facing my sins anymore, now that I regularly experienced the true catharsis of taking them to the cross. My accountability group with two seminary friends became a weekly excuse to confess to each other and repent to God together. Though I often resisted that initial bending of my knees, I would inevitably become reluctant to leave the posture of prayer. I began to really *experience* the forgiveness of God, and it freed me to pursue Him more fervently.

I became convinced that repentance was always the first step in the process of change. Without repentance, I was a guilt-driven man

relying on my own strength and my own skewed perception of my problems. With it, I was a grace-driven man with God's strength and a more biblical perception of my problems.

As I pursued it more regularly, my repentance took on a more positive, forward-looking character as well. Even as I prayed for God's forgiveness, I thought through future situations where I'd be tempted in the same way, and asked for strength to act wisely when they arrived.

God answered my prayers, and I really started to change. Even my wife noticed. Rather than ascetically forcing myself to complete every little unfinished task—or coast until the next "clean slate" came around—I forced myself to accept some losses and focus on absolute top priorities. Now my time in prayer to God was at the top of that list, followed by time with my family and adequate sleep. Non-negotiable school assignments followed, and though they weren't as good as they could have been, they weren't altogether bad. I still learned a lot that semester.

Ongoing Change

In the last two years, I have continued to grow in my understanding of procrastination, particularly as I've recognized the impact it has on other people. While revisiting that 2 Thessalonians passage about busybodies, I discovered an antecedent passage that explained *why* Paul treated the matter so seriously: "so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders, and so that you will not be dependent on anybody."⁴ In other words, both my witness to non-Christians and my love for the church (not to mention my family) are crippled by my procrastination.

Seeing my failures in these areas not only provided more fodder for repentance, but new awareness of the consequences of my sin: Less blindered now by the anxiety of impending work, I saw how insensitively I had been unloading my responsibilities onto my wife and daughters. I began seeing how many opportunities to love and serve others I was missing because of the disorder in my own life. Every

²See 1 John 3:14, Romans 6:6.

³See Galatians 5:22.

⁴1 Thessalonians 4:12.

time I broke a commitment or fudged a deadline, I saw how poorly I reflected God's character to a world that already distrusts His people—for good reason. For the first time I heard Jesus' command, "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No,'" as a direct extension of the Great Commission.⁵

As my battle with procrastination has matured, I'm learning not so much how to "figure out" my heart, but more how to subdue it. There's not a fully sanctified part of me that can perfectly diagnose and treat the sinful part; rather, my whole heart is unreliable—or as Jeremiah says, "deceitful above all things."⁶

Recognizing the unreliableness of my heart has given me greater appreciation for corporate means of sanctification, particularly my close friends who have a standing invitation to show me my sin—and to remind me of the gospel. When I've got a lot of work coming due soon, I ask them to encourage me to work ahead diligently, and to challenge me when I get overwhelmed. Knowing how much I need that outside input has given me greater courage to do the same for them, "speaking the truth in love."⁷

Just as I had been largely ignorant of the machinations of my heart, I had also lost sensitivity to the whole-person consequences of neglecting and abusing my body. In the last year I've begun running three times a week with a close friend. Both of us have become better stewards of our physical health, and I have lost over 30 pounds. I haven't entirely forsworn Ben & Jerry's, but I eat much healthier now, and my energy level is more consistent. Lately I've been working to recognize when I'm full, and (of all things!) to stop eating.

Similarly, I now see sleep as a God-given responsibility, and not something I can sacrifice without cost. When I have to do last-minute work (which still happens, I'm afraid), instead of staying up half the night, I'll go to bed around 9:00 p.m. and get up at 4:00 a.m. That's still seven hours of sleep, and I have several quiet hours left for rested and focused study. I

always considered myself a "night person," but it turns out that I work much more efficiently in the morning. Following a schedule that's closer to my wife's has also improved our day-to-day sense of companionship.

The Road Ahead

I am profoundly grateful for the change God has wrought in me in this area, though there is much more to work on. My procrastinating desires tug at me right now, even as I write this article. All those years of working under pressure have made working ahead unnatural and inefficient. My new ideal is to work with last-minute focus and intensity, but well before the deadline. I don't do that very well yet, and Parkinson's Law still plagues my best efforts.

I also need to re-learn many of these lessons, particularly the theological ones. It is easy to drift out of a repentant mindset when conspicuous sins aren't showing up every day. Yet that complacency itself is something to repent of, and cause to ask God to continually "search me and know my heart."⁸ Just as I once confronted my unbelief that God can change me, I now need to confront my unbelief that He wants to change me "more and more."⁹ I'm still lazy, prideful, and prone to escapism, and those desires won't leave me in this life.

There are surely other desires stewing in my heart that I haven't fully examined yet. One of the great inconsistencies of my procrastination has been my proactive diligence in some areas, particularly those related to money and possessions. I've always paid my bills early, and every dollar I've spent in the last six years is accounted for in Quicken. I do my taxes in February. I service my car according to the manufacturer's schedule, and I fix things around the house immediately after they break. None of these are bad things, of course, but anything done "religiously" surely has religious implications. I probably have some idolatrous attachment to the security I find in money and things.

Another issue is that growth in this area can protect me from fear of others—though my

⁵Matthew 28:18-20.

⁶Jeremiah 17:9.

⁷Ephesians 4:15.

⁸Psalms 139:23.

⁹See 1 Thessalonians 4:1.

desires to maintain their respect are still fierce. I hate having to confess my failures, even to my wife, who knows me better than anyone. And when I do confess, I'm noticing how habitually I "spin" the details—if I stayed up till 1:59 a.m., I might tell her I went to bed around one o'clock. This spin factor is looking like a big iceberg in my life, and I'm reluctant to see how much more is submerged.

Conclusion

So I'm working out my salvation "with fear and trembling," yet with hope and confidence that "it is God who works in [me] to will and to act according to His good purpose."¹⁰

¹⁰Philippians 2:12, 13.

Procrastination is a distinctive tendency of mine, but it is not the only area where I need to change. As a man preparing for ordained ministry in the church, I long for a much more outward-directed and other-centered way of life. I want to fear God and to desire to please Him more than anyone else. I want "to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings."¹¹ I want to become more like Jesus, so that others will come to know Him, too.

It won't be easy, but I'm confident that God will do this, because He promised He would. And He doesn't procrastinate.

¹¹Philippians 3:10.