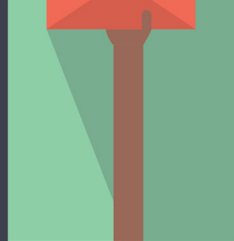




ON H. B. CHARLES JR. PASTORING

A SHORT GUIDE TO LIVING, LEADING,
AND MINISTERING AS A PASTOR



Chapter 11



INTERRUPTIONS OR APPOINTMENTS?

*Determining what is
important, urgent, or ignorable*

Some things in pastoral ministry are important, like prayer and the ministry of the Word. Some things are urgent but not necessarily important, like phone calls, emails, and meetings. And some things are both important and urgent, like the church building being on fire! Pastors have important work to do. We also have urgent matters to address. The challenge is that things are rarely both important and urgent. This requires wisdom to determine what is important or urgent or ignorable.

It feels like it happens every week, doesn't it? You start the week with great expectations and noble ambitions. This week will be twice as productive as the last. Study blocks will not be robbed this time. Your sermon will be finished early. You will be prepared for this week's staff meeting. That special project you have been working on will finally get your needed attention. Then the week starts.

And your well-laid plans fly off the desk, as if a strong wind just blew through the office. It did. These sudden, powerful, and schedule-destroying windstorms are called “interruptions.”

Someone shows up at the office with an emergency and they must talk to you. Only you. You get copied on an email exchange that really has nothing to do with you. Staff members keep knocking on the door for your input. An upcoming event is not ready and requires all hands on deck. Quarrelling leaders drag you into their conflict. A longtime member takes ill and is hospitalized. A beloved member moves upstairs to her eternal reward. An unexpected problem arises that cannot be solved without your direct involvement. Or some seemingly random but pressing need is dropped in your lap.

You have goals to reach. Your priorities are established. The to-do list is made. The schedule is set. And you are determined to be disciplined. But your dream of a balanced life and organized ministry never happens. You keep waking up to reality. You almost cannot get out of bed without stumbling over the clutter of the day. How do you sift through the clutter? How does a pastor keep the main thing the main thing? How can one distinguish between the important, the urgent, and the ignorable?

The important

Jesus taught a strategic way to overcome worry: “. . . seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). I have developed a simple principle from this verse to help me keep my priorities in order: Put first what the Lord tells you to put first, when the Lord tells you to put it first.

There are some things that remain on this list of important matters that must be priorities. For instance, one’s daily quiet time

of prayer and Scripture intake should be vigilantly guarded. If Jesus found it necessary to have quality alone-time with God (Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42), who are we to think we can successfully navigate life and ministry without doing likewise? Consider the things in your life that you do not do a day without. Eating? Television? Surfing the web? Talking on the phone? Reading the newspaper? It should not be that we do many things—some good and edifying and necessary, some not—but only spend quiet time with God once or twice a week. You should schedule devotional time every day.

What are the other important things in your life you must prioritize? I cannot answer that for you. Is it spending meaningful time with your wife and children? Is it reading or writing? Is it checking in with a prayer partner, accountability group, or young Christian you are discipling? Is it making sure you exercise to maintain your health? Is it spending a certain amount of time each day in sermon preparation? Is it something that may not make sense to anyone else but is important to you? Establish these priorities and do not allow other things to easily supersede these important things.

The urgent

Not everything that invades your schedule or to-do list is important. But it may be urgent. These pressing matters may not be high-priority items, but that does not mean they are unimportant. Of course, sometimes they are. It may be the most important thing in the world to the person who brings it to you. But that does not mean it is so for you. It is remarkable how the members claim the Lord has given *them* a heavy burden about something that should be done in the church. So they bring that heavy burden to you and dump it on your shoulders. I do not think this is what Paul meant when he exhorted us to “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2).

Just because a thing is not being done does not automatically mean you should be the one who does it. It may mean that it should not be done for now. Or it may mean that someone else should step up and do it.

I remember how frustrated I would become when members would drag me into their interpersonal conflicts. Someone said something or did not say something. Someone did or did not do something. And someone had an issue that I had to deal with, though I was neither part of the problem nor the solution. Yet they brought it to me, because I was the pastor. I was delivered from this foolishness when I studied the instructions of Jesus in Matthew 18:15–20, about how to deal with a sinning brother. When someone brought to me their urgent problem with so-and-so, I would ask, “Have you talked to so-and-so about this?” “Well, no,” came the response. “I thought I should let you know first what was going on.” Rather than getting involved in something I should not, I was able to advise them to talk to the other person directly and privately. It was the biblical, Christian thing to do. But it also delivered me from the tyranny of the urgent.

In a real sense, we should write all of our plans in pencil.

Of course, urgent things can be important. You did not plan for that member to be rushed to the hospital. The big decision was not on your calendar for the day. Caring for a grieving family and preparing to preach a funeral was not on your to-do list this week. But it is there and cannot—and should not—be neglected. In a real sense, we should write all of our plans in pencil. Then we should submit them to God to edit in what He wants in and edit out what He wants out. God uses His sovereign eraser at unexpected times

and in strange ways. But we must learn to bow the knee of our intent to His will. Look for the hand of God in what seems to be an interruption and follow Him. Solomon counseled, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths” (Prov. 3:5–6).

The ignorable

In his *Lectures To My Students*, Charles Haddon Spurgeon urged ministers to have one blind eye and one deaf ear. That is the first chapter I read of this classic book on pastoral ministry. As I scanned the table of contents, the chapter title jumped out at me. I couldn’t wait to find out what it means to have a blind eye and a deaf ear. I have never forgotten the answer.

As a pastor, you need to know what to ignore. In ordering your priorities, some things should be placed first, some things should go next, and other things should not be on the list at all. In some instances, this requires spiritual discernment. The land may look good from afar. But it may be quicksand that unnecessarily consumes your time, focus, and energy. And you need godly wisdom to know who and what and where to stay away from (James 1:5). Yet other things do not require you have the wisdom of Solomon to figure out. They are obviously not worth your time and you should stay away from them at all costs.

As a young pastor, I would read the mail that came through my office and feel the need to respond to it all. I soon learned this was an easy way for other people’s agendas to highjack your time. You have more important things to do than waste time perusing the multiple advertisements, blind appeals, and other junk mail that comes across your desk. The bigger mistake I made was read-

ing anonymous letters. Pastors should be open to counsel or rebuke, but you should not subject yourself to those who are bold enough to write their criticisms but do not sign their names to them. Life will be easier, your time will be better used, and your ministry will be more joyful when you learn to ignore the things that are not worth your time. “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15–16).

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