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## PILLAR 1

**THE ORIGIN OF  
PRODUCTIVITY***You Belong to God*

Over the past ten years, I've gone deep down the self-help rabbit hole. I've read all the most influential books on personal productivity, studied the various theories of time management, and experimented with just about every productivity trend and tool you can think of. And since 2016, I've been writing and teaching about personal productivity from a Christian worldview. But I haven't always been interested in this topic. In fact, for a long time I thought the subject was decidedly *unchristian*. And when I did finally take an interest in my own productivity, it was for all the wrong reasons. I now see that the reason I didn't think productivity mattered and the reason I first took an interest in it were both rooted in the same lie: "it's my life."

"It's my life" is a radical and often rebellious mode of thinking. It's the attitude behind our insistence that we don't owe anything to anyone and that no one can tell us what to do. My life is my possession to do with as I choose. And "it's my life" is the fundamental assumption

behind the spirit of our age. It's in the movies we watch, the books we read, and in the background of every secular work on productivity. We are constantly bombarded with the lie, "It's my life, so I can use it however I want." This self-centered philosophy leads to all manner of woes, but it also happens to be the root of two opposite conclusions we might draw about the place personal productivity should hold in our lives. And I should know because I've fallen for both.

## TWO WAYS WE GET IT WRONG

The first way "it's my life" thinking can lead us astray is by causing us to believe productivity is entirely unimportant. If you had met me at the beginning of my college career, you would certainly not have said, "Now there's a guy interested in personal productivity!" Quite the opposite, in fact—I was overweight, addicted to video games, and without purpose or ambition in the world. I had no idea who I was, why I was here, or where I was going. And I didn't care.

What made my state even more pathetic was that I was arrogant about it. Ambition and productivity were for people in suits with fake smiles and the word "entrepreneur" on their business cards. Why would I want to be like *those* people? If they wanted to pursue their little careers to make them happy, fine. But what was that to me? Leave me alone and let me do what makes *me* happy. And what made me happy was *Halo 3* and Flaming Hot Cheetos. To me, my logic seemed airtight: we are all just trying to do what makes us happy. So, what difference does it make if someone searches for happiness through business, gaming, or even trapeze artistry? It's my life.

In part, I was right. If those productivity-minded sales bros who I had such contempt for were only pursuing productivity for worldly success, then we weren't all that different. We were both believing the

“it’s my life” lie and just drawing different conclusions from it. I had concluded that since it’s my life, productivity was a matter of preference. Maybe this is how you think about productivity too—a fine thing to pursue if you care to, but not something you need to worry about.

The second way “it’s my life” thinking expresses itself regarding personal productivity is in prioritizing productivity for the wrong reasons. Many people, some Christians included, see productivity merely as a vehicle for helping them create the life that will make them most happy. And this vision of productivity is exactly what most self-improvement resources propagate. I’m embarrassed to say it, but this motivation is why I first became interested in productivity. From the outside it appeared I had turned a leaf, but really, I was the same person. Now, instead of being lazy because I believed “it’s my life,” I wanted to get more done because “it’s my life.” It was still all about me.

Halfway through my undergraduate degree program, I transferred schools and determined to reinvent myself. I decided I was going to get As, start eating healthy, get in shape, and really become someone. Driven by this newfound determination, I got deep into the productivity genre. I shoveled every podcast, book, and blog on productivity into my brain. I couldn’t get enough of the stuff. And guess what—the things I learned really did work!

I lost weight, got a girlfriend, became more confident, and even got better grades—just like the gurus promised. But all the while I was unknowingly drinking theological poison. Reading all that stuff on productivity hadn’t just been teaching me how to get more done. Behind every tip for managing my time, setting effective goals, or creating lasting habits was that same underlying assumption: “it’s my life.” The motivation for working harder and getting more done was always so *I* could become happier, *I* could be more successful, or *I* could get richer. The focus was always *me*. *This is the origin of all unchristian*

*productivity. It is a selfish desire for self-improvement for self's sake.*

First, we need to redeem the origin of productivity. I don't mean the history of the personal productivity movement, though we will look at that more in chapter 5. I mean the origin of a person's desire to get more done. Maybe, like me, you have read all the productivity classics, can't stand wasting time, and are borderline obsessed with performing tasks in the most efficient way possible. Or maybe you are deeply suspicious of personal productivity. You consider it the domain of wannabe millionaires or neurotic type A people, not something Christians should give heed to. I want to show you that Christians *should* care about personal productivity and *why* we should care.

The first pillar of productivity that must be redeemed is the origin of our productivity. The world says you belong to yourself. But the Bible says your life is a stewardship from God, a gift that must be used in service to God for His glory. Acknowledging this fundamental difference will help us pursue productivity in a way that honors God by putting Him first, not ourselves.

## DEFINING PRODUCTIVITY

Before we get too far along, let me give a definition for what I mean when I say "productivity." Throughout this book, unless otherwise noted, the word "productivity" refers to *personal* productivity. Which is to say, this is not a book about the output of farms, factories, companies, or machines. We're talking about people.

When it comes to books, the genre we call "productivity" encompasses a variety of subjects. Type "productivity" into Amazon and you'll find works on time management, to-do lists, goal setting, prioritization, and much more. But at a basic level, when modern people talk about personal productivity, they are usually talking about how

efficiently and consistently an individual can complete important tasks. This is how I plan to use the word in this book. Productivity is about efficiently accomplishing the right things. My contention is that what those things are, why you want to accomplish them, and what it means to do so efficiently should be different for Christians, considering what the Scriptures teach about our relationship to God.

### *Tips, Tricks & Philosophy*

Several years ago, I was on vacation with my wife, Kim, in Lake Arrowhead, California. I had just finished seminary and my thoughts were on the future. Where was I going? What did I want to do? How could I best serve God with my gifts? I was praying and searching the Scriptures, but I was also looking for advice in books on goal setting, planning, and personal productivity.

One afternoon, after taking a walk by the lake, we came back to our cabin to rest for a little while before dinner. I stretched out on the couch, the scent of pine still fresh in my nostrils and the relaxing songs of birds drifting through the cracked windows. I took a deep breath and hit play on a new audiobook I'd downloaded just before the trip.

I hadn't been listening for long before the author said something that caught my attention. He was quoting his mentor, saying, "He taught me that life is simply a collection of experiences; our goal should be to increase the frequency and the intensity of the good experiences."<sup>1</sup> I nodded approvingly and whispered aloud, "Ooh, that's good." I started looking around the room for my pen and notebook so I could write it down. Then I caught myself.

The problem?

Describing the goal of life as increasing the frequency and intensity of good experiences is almost the dictionary definition of hedonism. This is how Webster defines hedonism: "the doctrine that pleasure

or happiness is the sole or chief good in life.”<sup>2</sup> There I was, a Bible-believing, fancy-shmancy seminary graduate, feeling ready to take on the world for Christ, and I was merrily nodding along to the tenets of pagan philosophy wrapped in a modern productivity book. The worst part of it all is I had been writing my blog on personal productivity from a Christian perspective for three years at this point. The whole purpose of that blog was to expose and correct this kind of unbiblical thinking about productivity! And yet I still fell prey to the “it’s my life” philosophy of productivity.

I wish I could say this was the only time I had that experience while reading a book on productivity, but it wasn’t. Between the practical tips and tricks, authors of books like these can’t help but insert their philosophy of life. You simply cannot speak about productivity very long before talking about why we care about it. And the origin of a Christian’s interest in productivity ought to be radically different from that of a person who does not know Christ. No matter how you slice it, we want to be productive either to serve ourselves or to serve God. And as much as I love and continue to benefit from books, podcasts, and blogs on productivity produced by secular authors, I’ve learned I can’t let my guard down. Every philosophy of productivity contains a theology.

## ME-CENTERED MOTIVATION

While every author may not state it as plainly as the one I just quoted, the most common unbiblical idea you’ll find in nearly every work on productivity is a me-centered motivation. We call it *self*-improvement for a reason. The promise is that you can have more success, more money, more respect, more peace, and more happiness if you can learn to get more done. It’s an appealing proposition. Just imagine how amazing your life would be if you got everything under control!

Don't get me wrong. It's not that there's something wrong with wanting to improve yourself—the book in your hands is unabashedly concerned with helping you improve. But whether you're seeking to advance your career, get in better shape, or simply learn to manage your time more effectively, the goodness of those pursuits hinges on their *why*. Do I care about productivity because I want to make the most of my life for Christ? Or do I care about it because I want a killer beach bod and a Lambo? We must be discerning when it comes to our own hearts. And that begins by rooting our basic beliefs about productivity not just in who we are, but in *whose* we are. If you are a Christian, you belong to Christ. Your life is not your own.

The world says you belong to yourself, but the Bible says you belong to God. This fundamental truth is the first pillar of Christian productivity. But far from stopping us from caring about productivity, I believe it is the strongest motive for pursuing it.

### **NOT YOUR LIFE, BUT HIS**

We will reference John 15 frequently throughout this book. This passage comes as part of Jesus' Farewell Discourse the night before His crucifixion, and He delivered these remarks to the eleven remaining disciples immediately after the last supper. In this chapter, Jesus speaks of Himself as "the true vine" and His followers as "the branches." This is one of the most important passages in the New Testament about the believer's union with Christ. This union, which is ours by faith, is the basis of our right standing before God the Father and our shared inheritance of every spiritual blessing and promise of God. But our union with Christ is also the basis for all God-honoring productivity.

There are several interesting observations about productivity and the Christian that we can make in this chapter. John 15:5 says, "I am



the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” Those who are in Christ “bear much fruit.” Or, we could say, Christians are productive. We’ll look much more at the nature of this fruit and what the relationship between vine and branches says about Christian productivity in later chapters. But for now, I want to note what this passage indicates about the origin of our productivity. Christian productivity is not primarily about who we are, but whose we are. Christian productivity begins by acknowledging that we belong to Christ.

It’s *not* my life. It’s His.

If you believe in Jesus Christ, you belong to God. That’s why we call Him Lord. It’s an act of submission to His claim on every aspect of our lives, including our work, our ambitions, how we manage our time, and everything in between. The apostle Paul couldn’t have put it more plainly: “*You are not your own*, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19b–20). It’s not your life because you were bought and paid for. To redeem productivity, therefore, we must begin by considering our own redemption.

To redeem literally means to buy back, pay a ransom for, or reclaim as one’s own. You see the concept of redemption in the Old Testament “right of redemption.” According to Mosaic law, a person had the right, under certain conditions, to purchase back a piece of family land that had previously been sold (see Lev. 25:25–29 and Jer. 32:7–8). The plotline of the book of Ruth centers on this kind of redemption. The story culminates with Boaz marrying Ruth and purchasing back the land that would have belonged to her deceased husband, because another relative refused to redeem it for her (Ruth 4:6). Boaz is said to be acting on Ruth’s behalf as a “kinsman-redeemer”—someone with the right and responsibility to rescue a relative from poverty or trouble (Ruth 3:9; 4:9, 10; see also Lev. 25:47–55). But the biblical concept of

redemption goes beyond real estate.

In the ancient world, one could buy back prisoners of war. If you paid the price, you had the right to redeem your people from an enemy nation. This was true of slaves as well. When the New Testament speaks of believers being redeemed by Jesus Christ, it's using this concept in a spiritual sense. When God redeems a sinner, He is buying us back from the slave market of sin. Your price has been paid. So, if your price has been paid, does that mean you are free? Yes, in a sense. Redeemed people are set free from sin, but now they belong to a new master. Romans 6:22 says, "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God." You were bought by God. Now He is your Lord and Master. You belong to Him, and so does the work of your hands. Now, instead of offering our productive efforts to be used for unrighteous and self-gratifying work, we offer them to our new Master for His work. "Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness" (Rom. 6:13). But to fully appreciate how amazing this transformation is, we must recall that redemption always requires payment. And the price of our spiritual redemption was steep.

## YOU WEREN'T CHEAP

Knowing the high price God paid for our redemption should engender a sense of obligation in us. To be clear, God does not expect us to repay grace (nor could we ever hope to). Salvation is a gift; we contribute nothing to it. But notice that Paul links our purchase price to a command: "For you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20). The price of our redemption should logically lead to us wanting to glorify God. Often, we don't feel the weight of that obligation

because we don't dwell on just how expensive the price of redemption was. The price for our redemption was the blood of Jesus Christ.

In Ephesians, the apostle Paul writes, "In him we have redemption through his blood" (Eph. 1:7). Paul similarly describes the church as being "purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28 κτν). We weren't cheap. God poured out His wrath on His only begotten Son, sending Him to the cross to suffer and die on our behalf, then raising Him again from the dead so that the Father might buy us back for Himself. You were bought and paid for with the most precious currency in the universe—the blood of the Son of God. This is cause for thankfulness and rejoicing, for it means that our sins are forgiven, we have a right standing before God, and we have the sure hope of heaven (Col. 1:14; Rom. 3:24; Heb. 9:15). Reflecting on the price of your redemption should cause you to weep with joy. But it should also cause you to treat your life not as your own but as a precious stewardship from God. As Charles Spurgeon put it, "Your whole manhood belongs to God if you are a Christian. Every faculty, every natural power, every talent, every possibility of your being, every capacity of your spirit—all were bought."<sup>3</sup>

## PRODUCTIVITY IS LIFE STEWARDSHIP

When Christians hear the word stewardship, we often think of money. We think of giving to the church, investing wisely, and not wasting our money. But financial stewardship, though important, is only one aspect of a Christian's responsibility to God. If we belong to God, our whole lives are a stewardship, not just our wallets.

Jesus talks about stewardship in the parable of the talents. Speaking of the kingdom of heaven, He says, "For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each

according to his ability. Then he went away” (Matt. 25:14–15). We call those men the master had look after his affairs stewards. A steward is simply someone charged with looking after something on behalf of someone else. In the same way, God has charged us to look after our lives which He has purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Understood this way, personal productivity ceases to be a way to get the most out of life for my sake. Instead, it becomes the set of tools I use to skillfully execute the stewardship I’ve been given. How do I best invest my years, months, hours, and moments to make the greatest return for my Master? How do I best care for my health, mind, and opportunities such that they are employed as productively as possible in God’s service?

Life stewardship will look different for every individual, and each of us will be given different things to steward, but the core principles stay the same. In the parable of the talents, the master entrusts money to the three servants “each according to his ability,” then he leaves (v. 15). Here is the first principle: we aren’t all given the same amount to steward. Some will have greater talents, some more money, some greater health, some more energy. Viewed this way, stewardship also eliminates jealousy.

I once heard the pastor of a small congregation humbly thank God that He had not given him more congregants than he could faithfully look after. This man understood he would give an account for the souls that God had entrusted to him. So instead of looking jealously at the megachurch down the road and grumbling that he didn’t have their pastor’s magnetic personality, as gifted a worship team, or as nice of a facility, he just decided to be faithful with what he had. The same should be true of us with our productivity. It’s not about competing to be the best or most productive. It’s about making the most of what the Lord has given us.

In the story of the talents, the first two servants invest their master's money and make a handy return for him: "He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more" (vv. 16–17). But the final steward did nothing with what he'd been given. "But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money" (v. 18). When the master returns, he rewards the first two and punishes the last. Why? This is the second principle of stewardship: stewards have a responsibility to make a good return on whatever has been entrusted to them, whether big or small.

Some people have all the talent, money, and opportunity in the world. They are privileged beyond imagination. We look at their energy, their zeal, and all that they can achieve and say, "Wow, I could never be that productive." But the truth is you aren't in a race against them. God is only concerned with how you stewarded what was entrusted to you. All you need to worry about is being faithful. Productivity for you might not look like waking up early, crushing it at the gym, and serving in six different ministries, all while holding down two jobs and raising a family. For a steward, productivity just means being faithful with what you've been given.

So, should Christians care about productivity? Absolutely! But the reason we care about it should be unique. I love the way R. C. Sproul put it: "Our calling as Christians is the highest calling there is, and the idea of being productive is not the invention of capitalism; it is the mandate of Christ."<sup>4</sup> The first pillar of a redeemed productivity, therefore, is its origin. The world says "it's your life," but God says "you belong to Me."

In the next chapter we will look at a daily practice that is the cornerstone of any productive life. We'll see how to put life stewardship into action by giving God the firstfruits of our day.

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