

EVERY DAY MATTERS

A Biblical Approach to Productivity

Brandon D. Crowe



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Every Day Matters: A Biblical Approach to Productivity

By Brandon D. Crowe

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To my dad

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Acknowledgments

My goal in this book is to serve readers by sharing what I have learned about productivity, and to advance the conversation from a biblical perspective. I do not assume that readers are experts either with the Scriptures or with productivity literature, yet readers with specialized knowledge of either or both will benefit as well. For the sake of readability, I have placed most references to biblical texts in the notes.

I'm grateful to Kent Hughes for taking time out of his schedule to discuss the book, and to write the foreword. Cassandra Frear, Dick Belcher, Logan Casey, and Stephen Coleman offered valuable feedback. Thanks to Derek Brown for helping get this project off the ground, and to everyone at Lexham Press. I'm grateful for the support of the faculty, board, administration, and staff of Westminster Theological Seminary, which makes books such as this one possible.

Thanks are also due to my family. Working on this book has been a reminder of how important they are and has strengthened my resolve to carve out even more time for them. As always, special thanks to my wife, Cheryl, for all she does. She is a great blessing. I dedicate this book with love and appreciation to my dad, Doug. He has provided me a model of diligence in life and work, and in how to prioritize the most important things.

Foreword

The author of *Every Day Matters* is a busy man, though you will not sense it when you meet him because of his unhurried, engaging manner. Dr. Crowe's easy smile and other-directedness offers no hint of the considerable responsibilities that he bears as head of the Department of New Testament at Westminster Seminary where he shoulders a full lecture schedule, serves as book review editor for both the *Westminster Theological Journal* and *Unio Cum Christo*, mentors PhD students, and meets deadlines for his publishers. And this does not include his most important responsibilities to his local church—and as husband to his lovely wife, Cheryl, and father of four bright, active, young children who, to me, look like they are off the set of *Harry Potter*.

I mention all this because this book, with its driving focus on how to live a productive life, is written by a remarkably busy, productive man—one who wears his responsibilities well with a genial grace. Those of us who work with Brandon have come to expect, say, during an intense faculty discussion, a witty word or humorous remark that puts things in perspective and brightens the room. And the fact that the author writes to us personally, from the inside, means the book resonates with penetrating authenticity.

As you read this book, you will see that Dr. Crowe has read and culled the relevant literature on productivity and includes the best of the insights in his thought. But what makes this book so wise and elevating is how he grounds his advice biblically and theologically, so that productivity is not a self-centered exercise, but centers on Christ's command to love God with all our heart and our neighbors as ourselves (compare Mt 22:37–39). For Christians, productivity demands that we do all that we can to serve Christ and his kingdom.

The biblical chapters also draw from the deep wells of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes that effectively ground the whole subject of work and productivity in Solomonic wisdom and balance, providing a solid foundation for pursuing productivity. Early on, Brandon cites with disapproval the first two sentences of Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, as the wrong place to begin theologically: "Believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities!" followed by "believe in yourself and release your inner powers." This unfortunate reasoning recalls the memorable quip of Adlai Stevenson, "Paul is appealing and Peale is appalling!" As Dr. Crowe shows, Paul's incredibly productive life began with his embracing his suffering and weakness as the ground of his mission and ministry. Paul's astonishing apostolic dossier (2 Cor 11) reveals a man whose confidence was not in himself, but in Christ and his return. The apostle's storied faithfulness, work ethic, discipline, self-control, and tenacity issued from this profound understanding of himself and of his God and Savior. The apostle Paul is appealing.

The author's step-by-step directives on ordering life's priorities, with a steady eye on the two great commandments (love for God and love for others), brings everything together and invites the reader to engage in graced selectivity *coram Deo* in ordering his or her priorities to effect maximum productivity.

Dr. Crowe goes on to supply biblically informed, common-sense practices for initiating, sustaining, and maintaining the essential disciplines of productivity. The beauty of all this is that the advice has been lived-out by the author—and thus it pulses with authenticity and enabling power.

I know of no better book to place in the hands of aspiring Christian men and women who want their life's trajectories to be productive for Christ and his kingdom.

Every Day Matters is a pleasure to read and will grace the life of every reader.

—*R. Kent Hughes*
Visiting Professor of Practical Theology
Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA
John Boyer Chair of Evangelism and Culture

PART I

Perspectives

In Part 1, I discuss the reasons why I have written this book (ch. 1), and then I provide a theological orientation to productivity. In chapter 2, I discuss wisdom literature of the Bible, focusing on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. In chapter 3, I turn to the New Testament and consider what the apostle Paul teaches us about living life in light of the most important things.

CHAPTER 1

Why You Need this Book

Sometimes there's so much to do you don't know where to start. My wife had that feeling several years ago, as she sat holding our one-year-old son on the kitchen floor. He had just thrown up and was crying. In this case, he had not only thrown up on himself, but all over my wife and the floor around them. There didn't seem to be any good options for where to start. How do you get out of that mess without making things worse? Do you clean the child up first? Yourself? The floor? Will the residue follow you down the hall? You have to do *something*; you have to start *somewhere*.

This is not the most pleasant picture to begin a book on productivity, but it illustrates a stark reality: sometimes you know you have to do something—maybe something you're dreading—and there doesn't seem to be any good way to do it. The longer you wait to get started, the harder it becomes. If you never get started, you'll never get finished.

I am here to help you think about how to get started and make progress toward important things in life—whatever that means for you. I am here to help you think about how to make

your life more fruitful and focused. You need to get started, and you need a plan for how to finish.

The Need for a Plan

Life is complicated, and it's easy to lose clarity in the face of daily, pressing needs. To cut through the complexity and begin to make progress, you need a plan of attack. This can be hard, because life comes at us fast. We're faced each day with a constant stream of choices—whether in big decisions or small decisions. And it's often the small, seemingly inconsequential decisions that you make each day—today—that have the biggest impact on your long-term success. How long should you work? What issues will you focus on? What will you spend your time doing this afternoon? What's most important? Given your limited time and energy, is it even possible to get everything done that is expected of you at school, work, and home?

I've written this book to help you think biblically about how to get things done (“productivity”), and to give practical advice for maximizing your time and energy toward the most important things in everyday life. These are things I've had to learn over the years through research, trial, and error. In my days as a student, college graduate, business professional, graduate student, and professor, I've often been overwhelmed with all the things I should know and be doing, and have struggled to know how to approach each day.

Many years of teaching at a seminary have helped me recognize the acute need for students to gain their footing and deal with a demanding and often unrelenting workload. I've received countless questions from students over the years wrestling with how to squeeze everything in that needs to be done. The most common prayer requests from students relate to time management. Quite often school isn't all that students are responsible

for; they have other obligations to consider. Many are married, and many have children (often small children). The need for prioritizing is especially pressing for those who are also working to make ends meet. And of course, busyness does not subside when the particular stresses of being a student are over.

Though I often see the squeeze particularly in the lives of students, such difficulties are by no means unique to students. For all those who work with ideas or who are responsible for their own schedules, there is a particular challenge to prioritize and invest your time in the most important and high-yield activities. Whatever your current role, the number of skills to be honed, people to meet, knowledge to master, and administrative responsibilities to be addressed can appear endless. The reality is we all have limited time each week.

Since you cannot do all that you would perhaps like to do, you need clarity to recognize the best ways to invest your time, as well as specific strategies for realizing the possibilities before you. You need to be able to think clearly about what the most important things are, and have a plan for getting those most important things done. Ideally, your approach would also yield more down time while also ensuring sufficient attention is devoted to the most important things in life. I aim in this book to help you accomplish both these things.

I also want to take some of the mystery out of how to get more done, and offer a peek behind the curtain of the sorts of practices implemented by many successful people. It can sometimes be surprising—even discouraging—to find that those who seem to be the busiest are also the most productive. What’s their secret? How do they do it all? Why does the saying ring true, “If you want something done, ask a busy person”? Yet the super-productive have the same amount of time each week as

everyone else, and the sorts of practices they implement can be practices you learn from and implement in your own life.

Therefore be encouraged; you don't need a full-time staff to be more productive. A few strategic disciplines and investments of time on the front end, over the course of time, can yield exponential results in your own life.

The Need to Connect Productivity, Life, and Scripture

For those who look to Scripture for ultimate guidance, having biblical perspective on productivity is imperative.¹ Many books on how to accomplish more are in circulation today, but few of them come from a Christian perspective that is faithfully informed by the Bible. As a result, it can be difficult to know how to square the ambitiousness envisioned in popular productivity books with biblical humility. I also aim for this book to be a helpful starting point for those who don't know where to start. For those who have read widely in the field of productivity, what follows is my own synthesis of insights and twists.

Researching productivity is not my full-time job. I've had to pick it up along the way. I wish I had started earlier. I know what it's like to feel swamped. I know what it's like to be a student (at various stages), and I also know what it's like to graduate and have no idea what you're doing in the world. I've experienced the struggle of trying to balance an open-ended workload while caring for a family. I've been, to some degree, responsible for my own schedule for many years, which brings unique opportunities and pitfalls. I've not always managed myself and my time well, but I have learned quite a bit about how to juggle complementary (and sometimes competing) responsibilities. I never had a course on how to do this; I had to figure it out.

To give you a glimpse into my typical weekly workload: as a professor I am responsible for writing and delivering lectures, creating and managing various writing projects, attending meetings, engaging with students, leading a department, answering emails, keeping up with the latest research on a wide range of issues, ministry outside the seminary, and editorial work. My wife and I have four children that we are responsible to teach, train, and rear, and with whom we spend much of our time. I'm called to love and serve my wife, and we need time for one another. On top of this, I have to find time for spiritual disciplines, for exercise, for recuperation, and for sleep.

Your situation may be similar to mine in some respects; it is no doubt different in some respects. But if you're reading this book, then you're probably looking for tips on how to be more productive. Maybe you have a good system already; maybe you're just beginning to think about these things. Whatever your situation, I want to help you by sharing what I have learned.

This book represents my own thinking about how to be productive and faithful in daily life. It derives from dozens of books, articles, seminars, podcasts, blogs, and so forth that I have gleaned from over the years as I have tried to find my footing. I'm not able to retrace my steps entirely to determine where I first learned many of the principles in this book (particularly those in Part 2), but I've done my best to identify sources and influences wherever possible. I'm eager to give credit to those that have helped me, which I've done in the notes throughout—though some of the principles seem, at this point, to be common knowledge in the world of productivity.

At the same time, the perspectives in this book are distinctly my own. I don't follow any one person's productivity method, but have tweaked various approaches and theories based on trial, error, and biblical principles. Just as I have been helped by what

others have said about productivity, I know you will be helped by the synthesis and biblical application in this book. Your method may end up being different than mine, but the most important thing is to think biblically about living fruitful lives and finding practical ways we can take steps toward realizing that ideal.

The Overarching Need: Loving God and Neighbor

We must think about productivity biblically. Being productive from a biblical perspective does not mean seeking first our own interests. Biblical productivity must be guided by the two great commands: loving God and loving our neighbor (Matt 22:37–39 ESV).² Love for God is more than an emotion (though it ought to include our emotions). Loving God also means keeping his commands; love and obedience go hand in hand in Scripture. Jesus says that if we love him, we will do what he commands (John 14:15).

Loving God and doing what he commands means we must be faithful stewards of what God has entrusted to us. This is illustrated in the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14–30). In this parable, Jesus speaks about servants entrusted with various amounts of talents (money). In each case, the servants are expected to be concerned for the master's work while he is away.³ The first two servants are faithful, though they have not been entrusted with the same amount in each case (five and two talents, respectively). Yet both doubled the amount of talents entrusted to them. In contrast, the third servant hid his master's money in the ground and did nothing with the talents entrusted to him. The first two servants were praised, whereas the third—who (wrongly) viewed his master as a harsh and unfair man—was chastised for being wicked and lazy. He did not even act in accord with

the character that he thought(!) was characteristic of his master. The third servant was wrong on both accounts.

It is notoriously difficult to make one-to-one correspondences to life from the details of parables (they are often more subtle than that), but one application from this parable seems clear enough: we are called to be faithful with what has been entrusted to us as we await the return of Christ. This is a practical way for us to love God. We must not follow the lazy example of the unfaithful servant. We are called to be faithful in a little, and we just might find ourselves being entrusted with more. Elsewhere Jesus states that to those whom much has been given, much will be required (Luke 12:48). Productivity must be related to the first great command to love God with all that we are, which includes being faithful with what he has entrusted to us.

In addition to love for God, love for neighbor is also at stake in our productivity. Keeping God's commands entails loving our neighbor. Being productive means we are thinking not only of ourselves, but of others. First Peter 4:10 connects stewardship to love for others: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." This should affect how we spend our time. One way we love others is by doing our best work to serve them. If you're a manager, this may mean doing your best to serve both your company (and those you oversee) and your customers. If you're a student, it may mean humbly learning as much as you can to serve others in the future. If you're a pastor, it may mean guarding the time you've devoted to sermon preparation each week.

We also love others by making time in our schedules for them. If I say I love my wife and children, but am never around or willing to spend time with them, then my actions do not show love. To make time for others, we need to be diligent and wise

in the way we spend our time when we're working. One struggle in times of frenetic busyness is being distracted and distant even when we are physically present with other people. Perhaps there are a hundred things we feel like we need to be doing. We may even feel guilty for not working at that moment. This is another area in which this book can help—having a biblical productivity method in place can help you maximize the time you spend with others. Thinking proactively and intentionally about scheduling and productivity can allow you to be free when you are scheduled to be free, and to work when you are scheduled to work. This can be one of the simplest ways to think about what productivity is.

In short, being productive from a biblical perspective means doing all we can for the sake of Christ and his kingdom. I am especially interested in helping those who want to maximize their impact for the kingdom of God. Though no amount of effort on our behalf can merit salvation, those who follow Christ are called to diligent obedience as new creations.

What to Expect in this Book

What I have written is designed to be short and practical for those who seek to gain greater clarity in what they ought to do with their time (and how they ought to do it). I will also discuss what Scripture has to say about living a faithful and productive life. There is no silver bullet I can offer that will solve every issue. However, as one who has thought about issues relating to productivity for years, and who needs a well-oiled workflow to accomplish my present responsibilities, my goal is to provide basic principles that can translate into sustainable practices that will help bring focus and sanity to the busyness of your life. I make no claim to have it all figured out. In fact, I regularly fail and therefore need to tweak my own productivity methods. But

I can provide some light along the path, wherever you currently find yourself.

I want to help you accomplish the best things and more things in the limited time you have. This is not a theoretical issue; it affects choices you make on a daily basis. For example, how are you to think through the options of what to do when a major presentation is due the day after your daughter has an important event that will occupy most of your evening? Such questions can be particularly difficult when the competition is between family and something “spiritual,” like church or the study of theology. It can be easy to conclude that anything “theological” takes priority. But, as I will explain, this can be misleading.

Another example might lead to a different conclusion: what should you do when a group of associates invites you to play golf in the middle of the week at the time you had planned to work on a long-term project?

These can be difficult decisions, and they require a healthy dose of wisdom. To determine the wisest course of action in a given situation means you must know what Scripture says about your callings and your limitations. It also means you must wrestle with priorities and figure out a way to make room for accomplishing your most important tasks.

You also need a sense of urgency to get started. The time is short. Now is the time to get clarity and focus. It can be particularly valuable to gain focus and to labor diligently when you’re young, which has the potential to yield fruit for decades to come. A foundation well-laid early in life can percolate and mature into an abundant yield later in life. For those who are mid- or late-career, you already have a wealth of experience to draw from that has the potential, with a few tweaks, to be harnessed for a new degree of productivity in days ahead. Regardless of

where you currently are, one of the keys to a productive life is recognizing the best time to get started is today.

If you're looking for the most succinct summation of this book, it's this: *every day matters*. This phrase is a double entendre, which can be taken in two ways.

1. Every day matters in the sense that each day is significant. Therefore, I will emphasize the importance of each day.
2. Everyday matters in the sense that the daily things you do (that is, the seemingly inconsequential matters of daily life) are who you really are. Additionally, the results of what you choose to do on a daily basis add up over the long haul either to help you reach your goals, or to keep you from reaching your goals.

If you remember the phrase *every day matters*, then you will have a good handle on the message of this book.

What Not to Expect in this Book

A few words about what not to expect are also in order.

1. This book is not a quick fix or a silver bullet; these do not exist. Instead, I will help you think strategically about how to put systems and routines in place that will help you yield greater results. There is not one way to approach the issues covered in this book; there are many ways. The principles generally remain the same, but how you implement them will vary. Additionally, your circumstances and stage of life may mean that you need

to implement some strategies differently from the way others implement them. Depending on your current circumstances, you also may be limited in how free you are to implement some of the practices. That's ok. Different seasons in life require different approaches. You'll need to figure things out by trial and error to find what works for you.

2. This is not a self-help book. Unfortunately, a number of books on productivity, management, and leadership from a Christian context point to Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* as a key, formative influence.⁴ That's not my approach. The first chapter in Peale's book is a plea for us to trust in ourselves; it's difficult to think of too many other starting points that are worse theologically.⁵ To be sure, there is a place for self-confidence, yet such confidence must ultimately be related to confidence in the God who made us, and it must also deal with our sinfulness and limitations. This is one reason I include two chapters outlining a biblical perspective on productivity.
3. This book is not about "self-realization," but is designed to help you maximize your efforts for the glory of God and his kingdom. To that end, it's important to emphasize again that the kingdom must be granted to us (Luke 12:32), and there is nothing we can do to save ourselves (Rom 3:23; 6:23).⁶ Instead, we must recognize our limitations, and that God must sustain us, empower us, and

cause our efforts to bear fruit as we seek to live by kingdom priorities (Matt 6:33; Luke 12:31).

4. This book is not exhaustive. I cover a number of angles in order to address many of the major issues you need to think through to establish a solid, sustainable productivity routine. However, each chapter could easily be turned into a book in itself. I have also not conducted any scientific research. Instead, this book gleans from a wide array of others' research and my own experiences. These are things I have gathered over the years while I have been engaged in studying, writing, research, teaching, and leading a family.

The Structure of this Book

This book is designed to be straightforward and easy to use. It's divided into three sections, which correspond to three pillars that need to be in place to have a productive life. Some books focus on the how-to with thin rationale for the why. Some books focus on principles without providing much practical help. And too many books provide little, incorrect, or simply no theological discussion. I will address all three of these areas in what follows.

In Part 1, I provide biblical perspective on productivity. This will set the tone for the rest of the book.

In Part 2, I walk through some of the basic principles of productivity. These will be familiar to some, but I will also add my own contributions, especially with an eye to the teaching of Scripture.

In Part 3, I discuss specific, practical suggestions for implementing the principles covered in Part 2.

There are basically two kinds of non-fiction books: practical books and theoretical books. Practical books teach you how to do something, whereas theoretical books provide information.⁷ This book is a combination of these two categories. Part 1 is mostly theoretical, providing biblical perspective on productivity. The final part (Part 3) is mostly practical, and will provide concrete advice and examples. The middle section (Part 2) is a hybrid: it's primarily theoretical but will undoubtedly be practical as well. Together, Parts 1-2 provide the theological and theoretical foundation for the practical suggestions in Part 3. To facilitate the practical aspects of this book, I include action steps at the end of each chapter in Parts 2-3.

I don't have it all figured out, but I'm confident this book will help you in your own quest to figure out the best ways to work most effectively for the sake of Christ and his church. But before we get to the practical steps, it's crucial that we're thinking biblically about what productivity means. That will be the focus of the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 2

Guiding Texts, Part 1 Wisdom Literature: The Benefits and Limitations of Diligent Work

Two of the most important books of Scripture for understanding the biblical perspective on productivity are Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Both of these books belong to the genre of wisdom literature, which wrestles with how we are to apply God's law in the nitty-gritty of daily life. Proverbs includes wide-ranging discussions and maxims relating to wisdom, which begins with the fear of the LORD (Prov 1:7). Before we consider how to live wisely in this world, we must understand that God is the authority over us, and we must listen to his Word if we want light for the path. Whereas Proverbs deals with applying the law of God in daily life, Ecclesiastes wrestles with the purpose of life—if everyone dies, what is the point of diligence in work? If we leave our work to someone else, does it even matter? In God's providence we have both of these books, which together provide a well-rounded foundation for biblical productivity.