

## Slower Traffic Keep Right (Part 3 of 9 in *Simple Summer* series)

James 5:7-11

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Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

In the 1950's there was an article in *Time* magazine about the advances in modern technology and how they would affect American culture as time progressed toward the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The article's tone was a bit anxious, as it stated that technological advances were going to make things so much quicker, easier, and more automated for us, that people would have to start working many fewer hours each week; or many fewer weeks per year; or retire at a much earlier age. The concern expressed in the article was that because of technological advances, we would all have far more leisure time than we would know what to do with. How would we fill all of that time?

And we all know that this anxious prediction has not come to fruition. Here we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with incredible technological advances, but we work more, and have less leisure time than we did 50 years ago. And while we do accomplish things faster, we also have higher expectations about productivity and speed; so instead of slowing down, we've begun hurrying even more. Time has become a commodity; productivity has become a virtue; and speed and efficiency have become top priorities.

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung once said, "Hurry is not *of* the devil; hurry *is* the devil."<sup>1</sup> Our current hurried selves are so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we have settled for a mediocre version of faith and relationships. We are skimming through our lives instead of actually living them. This is not what God intended for us.

Do you change lanes as you approach traffic lights, quickly assessing which line of cars is likely to take off most quickly when the light turns green? Do you count the number of people in each grocery line, and the number of items in each person's cart, before you get in line yourself? And then do you keep track of where you would have been should you have made a difference choice, racing a totally unaware stranger to see who can get out the door first? Do you lean way out into the street to see if there is traffic coming because you do not want to wait for the "walk" sign to come on? Do you always multi-task – driving and putting on makeup, watching TV while talking on the phone, checking messages while you converse with your family? Making grocery lists during church? Why are you in such a hurry?

In our culture, time has become a commodity. We say, "Time is money," and we invest it, spend it, save it, buy it, manage it, and waste it. These random increments called minutes and seconds have taken control of our lives, and we are always trying to see how few we can use in the tasks we have set before ourselves. We have made productivity one of our virtues, whereas one of the fruits of the spirit is actually patience. God calls us to live our lives not quickly, but with patience. Jesus *walked* where he wanted to go, and regularly took time out of his very busy life to go off by himself to pray and reconnect with God and those with whom he was closest. He spent 30 years preparing for his 3 years of ministry; and then 40 days in the desert to get ready to begin his work. Jesus knew that the journey was going to be as important as the destination, and that the people he met on the way were the people he had come to save. We are called to live like Jesus: engaged, yes; hurried, no.

If we count time as money, and productivity a virtue, then what happens when we have nothing to show for our time? When we spend it with children, for example, or caring for the elderly or disabled? What happens when we do things we cannot cross off a list or use to impress a superior?

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 77.

What happens when we are praying? Or in worship? Are we so uncomfortable with worship, and our presence so sporadic, because we think our time is worth more than what we get here? That we should have produced something in the hour we have spent in the pews?

A church I once attended had broadcast its services on the radio many years before, and still was obsessed with finishing each worship service in 57 minutes, the time they had for the radio spot. Near the end of the allotted time, members of the worship team would start holding up a watch at the back of the sanctuary to tell the pastor to wrap it up; and then presenting him after the service with a bulletin outlining exactly how many minutes each worship element had lasted. It didn't matter if the Spirit was moving or if someone was being inspired to testify to God's work in their lives, or if a family was receiving the care they desperately needed or a child was coming to faith for the first time. We had to hurry through worship, because somewhere along the line someone decided it was only worth one hour per week. How do we joyfully engage with God and others if we're constantly thinking about all the more productive things we could be doing with our time (and will be doing once the service is over)? Is that what God intends for our time together?

One of the issues at stake, I think, is that productivity has become such a virtue in our culture that we have begun to believe it is our saving grace. We have come to believe that our speed, our productivity, our hurry, will in some way justify us – that if we can produce enough, impress enough people with our hurry and our busyness, then perhaps we can save ourselves, or at least feel really *good* about ourselves. The problem with that for Christians is that we have already been justified; we have already been saved by God's grace, so trying to justify ourselves through hurry and productivity is both futile and redundant. God does not call us to be productive; God calls us to be faithful. Those are not always the same thing.

On Tuesday morning, just after 9:00, the office phone rang. I answered it, and the voice on the other end asked for help. He was stranded nearby and needed some financial assistance. He also needed a loving ear to hear the most painful story of his life. My first instinct was to forego the *listening* part of his needs, and simply send him financial help in the most expedient way possible, by calling in a credit card number. After all, it was the beginning of my work week and I had a long list of things to do. But I knew this was not what God called me to do. So mid-morning on Tuesday, I found myself at the Motel 6 in Fife, in conversation with a man I had never met and will most likely never see or hear from again.

But the thing that sticks out most about our visit is that he kept apologizing – first on the phone and then at least twice in person – for interrupting my morning. He kept saying, "I know you have other things to do today... I'm sorry to be so much trouble. I'm sorry to take so much of your time." That language is so prevalent in our society: your time, my time – as if it's personal property. The problem is that if time is a commodity or a personal possession, every unplanned action becomes an interruption instead of an opportunity, and every unscheduled interaction with a child of God becomes an intrusion instead of a blessing.

Hurried people cannot love, because love takes time, and does not always produce anything the world would call worthwhile. Hurried people cannot worship, because worship means waiting patiently for the Spirit to move, which may or may not happen in under 60 minutes. Hurried people cannot grow in faith, because prayer and Sabbath and fasting and Bible-reading take a lifetime to learn. Hurried people, I dare say, cannot be disciples – because we cannot follow one we have left in our dust. To follow is to stay behind, or at least to accompany, not to run ahead as quickly as possible. To follow is to emulate, and our God is one who yields control to us, not coercing us but waiting patiently for us to accept the gift of grace.

So how do we eliminate hurry from our lives? How do we slow down? There are some very practical things we can try: We can deliberately drive in the slow lane and instead of cursing the driver in front of us, who may not even be going the speed limit, we can offer a prayer of blessing for her, and for each car that passes us. We can eat slowly, deliberately chewing and tasting each bite and giving thanks for the earth that produced such delicious food. We can get in the longest line at the grocery store, and even invite someone to go ahead of us. We can take off our watches, put down our cell phones, and wait patiently on the curb to cross the street, even if there is no traffic. We can catch ourselves making races out of things that we actually have plenty of time for, and instead of rushing through our activities we can dwell in them and breathe deeply. We can discipline ourselves to slow down.

One of the most helpful disciplines for eliminating hurry from our lives is solitude: getting away by ourselves, away from the forces of society that relentlessly mold us, finding quiet so we can hear the voice of God and remember who we are and who God created us to be. In our solitude, whether it is 10 minutes in the morning before the rest of the family wakes up or a full-on silent retreat that we plan months in advance – we can admit that hurry makes us feel important and keeps us from feeling lonely, but it is a poor substitute for the grace and love of God which are always available to us. When we get away from our hurried lives; turn off the electronics which offer us speed, speed, and more speed; and spend time with ourselves, our thoughts, our prayers, and the Spirit of God which always accompanies us; we are calmed, reassured, and slowed down, so that we might return to the world without playing its games, remembering that we have been justified by grace, not by the production of our lives.

When I was in high school, one of my best friends had a traffic sign on the wall in his room. [Now I should say that he was a young man of the highest Christian character, so I am certain that he obtained this traffic sign in a legal manner rather than stealing it from the side of the road.] Josh had a One Way sign, and he had mounted it on the wall sideways, so that the arrow pointed up. It was a reminder to him that he was headed to heaven, that his life's direction was toward God, and that Jesus was the only way. I thought this was so *cool*, so I started thinking of what kind of traffic sign I would put up in my own room, and I quickly decided that I needed one that said, "Slower Traffic Keep Right." I liked to think of myself as a speed demon, you see, and I thought the sign would say to people, "Either keep up with me or get out of the way." It would show that I was on the fast track, headed somewhere great.

But I quickly realized that this sign could have another meaning, as well, because 'right' is not only a direction. And I wondered if I wouldn't be better off remembering that slower traffic keeps right: on the right track, even virtuous. I realized that when I slow down I do better work; I see people for who they are and am able to nurture relationships; I connect with God. I remembered that God does not ask me to be speedy, and God certainly does not want me to leave others in the dust if they can't keep up. God wants me to love and be loved, to have and nurture faith, to remember that my hope and the hope of the world is in God's hands, not mine, however busy they may be.

So as we work toward simplifying our lives so that we can focus on God's vision, I pray that we will slow down and remember that patience is a virtue, but productivity is not. Time is a gift, not a commodity. God calls us to faithfulness, not speed and efficiency. And it may just be that slower traffic keeps right.

Amen.