

8-16-2009, The Balanced Life
Chapelwood UMC, Lake Jackson

The Balanced Life: Sleep

This month we are talking about a balanced life. God has created in such a way that we are healthier, happier and more productive if we spend equal time working, sleeping and in recreation. Over the course of our lifetimes we should spend about one-third of our lives working, one-third sleeping and one-third taking care of our bodies, our souls and our relationships.

This is the way God created us, so this is God's will for us. Ecclesiastes tells us that it is wise to live a balanced life, that what is right to do at certain times of our lives is wrong to do at other times of our lives. There right times to work and wrong times to work. There are right times to sleep and wrong times to sleep. (This is a very bad time to sleep.) There are right times for recreation and wrong times for recreation. We shouldn't be working when it is time to sleep. We shouldn't be playing when it is time to work, and so on.) We need to maintain a balance.

Last week I talked about the need for a balanced work life. The quality of our lives and our work is diminished if we fail to maintain a balanced work life. People with unbalanced work lives are called "workaholics" or "workavoiders." A balanced work life would be working between fifty and sixty hours a week. Work includes the time we spend in our jobs, school work, work around the house, caring for family members, and volunteer work in the church and in the community. The result of an unbalanced work life is that important things don't get done. Workavoiders don't do the work necessary for a better quality of life for themselves and for others. Workaholics are so busy working that they don't take time to maintain the health of their bodies, their souls and the relationships in their lives. Sooner or later, something important in the workaholic's life breaks or dies because of neglect.

I was taught the importance of a balanced life by a lawn maintenance man. This man had a lawn care business. He maintained the grounds of the church I was serving. We had a large campus, and he would come in early one day a week and spend all morning and part of the afternoon mowing and trimming. One day, as he was finishing up, I asked him if he would be spending the rest of the day working on someone else's lawn. He said, "No. I'll go back to the shop and spend the rest of the day doing maintenance on my equipment." He said, "When I first got into this business, I would work on the grounds all day every day until my equipment broke down. After awhile I discovered I actually got more work done if I left a few hours every day for maintaining my equipment before it broke down. I'm more productive if I take care of my equipment."

I thought to myself, "That's a wise man." These bodies and these minds are the equipment God has given us. We can work until we break down, or we can do daily maintenance and avoid breaking down. We are more productive and enjoy life more if we do daily maintenance.

Sleep is a part of daily maintenance. I told Bonnie that I was dreading the idea of preaching a sermon on the importance of sleep. But, from what I have observed on Sunday morning, apparently many of our members don't get enough sleep through the week. I know that if you can fall asleep during my dynamic sermons, you must be sleep-deprived.

A balanced sleep life would be eight hours a day. I read an article in the newspaper today that was talking about how a very rare group of people have a gene that allows them to do well on six hours of sleep a day. The article went on to say that most people need 8-8 1/2 hours of sleep at night.

Over the course of our lifetimes, we should average eight hours of sleep per night. Now, I know that's an approximation. Some people need nine hours of sleep per night. Some people need seven hours of sleep per night. Our goal should be to get enough sleep so that we wake up on our own in the morning feeling resting and refreshed. If you need an alarm clock to get you up in the morning, you aren't getting enough sleep. If you're saying, "I need an alarm clock to keep me from being late to work," there is another solution. Go to bed earlier.

If you are a healthy adult and are regularly getting less than seven hours of sleep per night or more than nine hours of sleep each day, your life is probably out of balance. If you are sleeping more than nine hours of sleep per day and you are not a small children, elderly, or sick, you are probably suffering from depression or you have a serious case of laziness.

Those who are regularly get less than seven hours of sleep per night are either spending too much time working or playing or both. Lynn Long was telling us in Church Council surveys show that Americans get an average of 6 1/2 hours of sleep per night. That's not enough.

Sleep deprivation causes problems. It causes health problems. Sleep deprivation lowers the immune system. It can cause high blood pressure, which causes others problems, such as heart disease. There is some evidence that it may contribute to the development of adult onset diabetes. It affects your emotions. When we are tired, we suffer increased mood swings. We alternate between depression and irritability and anger. (I think some of the folks in these town meetings are needing a good night's sleep.) It affects your mind. A tired person doesn't think as clearly. Your reflexes become slower. You become forgetful. Studies have shown that a sleep deprived person is just about as dangerous driving a car as someone driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

So, why are Americans going without sleep? I think it is because we haven't grown up, when it comes to sleep. I have four grandchildren. My children are raising them in a structured lifestyle, which means they have a regular bedtime. When my children tell their children it is time to go to bed, three of the children begin to cry and beg to be allowed to stay up longer. They are still crying when they are put to bed. They cry themselves to sleep. The other grandchild sings herself to sleep.

Most children fight sleep. They will be so tired and cranky that they can't see straight, but they will fight sleep. They think that if they go to sleep, they will miss something fun and important. They think that sleep is a waste of time. Apparently a lot of us never outgrow that childish dislike of sleep.

If you are still fighting sleep, let me share some thoughts with you that may help you become one of those people who sing themselves to sleep.

First of all sleep is not a waste of time. What happens while you sleep is as good or better than those things you might experience while you are awake. Those who think that sleep is a waste of time need to understand that important things happen while we are sleeping. Even though our conscious minds are turned off, our subconscious minds are busy working the whole time we are sleeping. And the work of the subconscious mind is powerful and important. At night we are going over the day's events and deciphering their meaning. We are sorting through the information we got and storing it away in our memories. (That's why people who don't get

enough sleep are forgetful.) We are working on problems. All of us have had the experience of waking up from a deep sleep with the solution to a problem which had us stumped. The subconscious mind is powerful.

Sleep time is not just a time for the sub-conscious mind to work, it is also a time to play. In our dreams we are entertained all night long. We experience adventures that make blockbuster movies look tame. The media—television, movies, radio, telephones, books, and so on—can only use a couple of our senses when they take us on adventures. Our dreams use all five senses. Many people take time when they wake each morning to remember their dreams. If you do that, you will discover you had quite an entertaining night.

Then, too, sleep is an excellent time to fellowship with God. The Bible is full of stories of God communicating with people in their dreams. The Spirit of God is communicating directly with our spirits—or our subconscious minds at all times. We often aren't aware of that continuous conversation because we are so occupied with the noises of life that the still, small voice of God is drowned out. But, when we sleep, there is nothing to distract us. We can spend the night in uninterrupted fellowship with God.

The Bible is full of stories of God speaking to people in their sleep. On your bulletin cover is a picture of Jacob as God spoke to him in a dream. Jacob knew nothing about God except what which his father taught him, until the night that he had a dream in which he saw a ladder going up into heaven and saw angels going up and down the ladder. That's when he became aware of the connection of heaven and earth. It was the beginning of a process which would eventually transform him from a unscrupulous, conniving, selfish man into a Man of God.

So, sleep is far from a waste of time. In some ways it is the most productive time of our day.

We have all had trouble sleeping at times. Let me offer you some suggestions. Don't run out and buy sleeping pills until you have tried these things.

First of all, get some exercise during the day. We build up tension, and it is very difficult to sleep when you are tense. Tension is the body preparing for the fight or flight response. The last thing a tense body wants to do is lie down and be still. So, sometime during the day spend some time satisfying the fight or flight response. Get some exercise. Burn off that adrenaline. A tired body wants sleep.

Have a routine to prepare for sleep. Between a half hour to an hour before your bedtime turn off the television and the computer and the i-pods. Have a quiet time. Get your bed clothes on. Brush your teeth. Read your Bible or a devotional book. Have a time of meditative prayer. As you pray, if some concern or task pops into your mind, hand it to God. Say, "Lord, I'm getting ready to go to bed. There is nothing I can do about this now. I place this in your hands tonight."

When I go to bed, if my mind is still racing after all that, I do something that Charles Allen suggested in his book, "God's Psychiatry." Silently, I start reciting the 23rd Psalm. I say it very slowly, and I picture the scenes it describes. I feel myself lying in lush, green grass, listening to a babbling brook. I enjoy that scene before I move on to the next one. I don't think I've ever gotten through the 23rd Psalm three times using that method without going to sleep.

If you go to sleep being with the Lord, you will enjoy his fellowship all night long, and you will wake up to his presence the next morning.

Sleep is a gift from God. Enjoy it in moderation.

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