

13 July 2014

7 Habits for Christians - 4

“Put First Things First”

Are you taking some steps to be a little more proactive rather than reactive? Have you started your own personal mission statement yet? Did you begin with the end in mind? If you did, then you are already working on Habit #3: Put first things first.

Here's the key thing to learn about putting first things first: the enemy of the excellent is not the bad; the enemy of the excellent is the good. It's not that we don't get the truly excellent things done because we're off doing bad things; it's that we don't do excellent things because we're too busy doing things that are good to do, but aren't as important. The less important crowds out the more important out of habit and because it's easier.

Think of it this way. What keeps the average Lutheran congregation from becoming truly excellent? And by truly excellent I mean a congregation centered around word and sacrament that really cares about the people inside the church walls AND outside the church walls. A congregation that is willing to adapt for the sake of its mission. That, by the way, is a good definition of putting first things first: a willingness to make changes for the sake of your mission, for the sake of what's most important. An excellent congregation is one that finds ways to help people grow in their relationship with God through study, through prayer, through service, through fellowship, through evangelism and through stewardship. Your definition of an excellent congregation might be a little different, but you get the idea.

What keeps most Lutheran congregations from achieving this excellence? Is it because they're off doing things they shouldn't be doing? Not really. It's that they put all their energy into doing things that are worth doing but are less important. For example, they engage in fund raiser after fund raiser trying to meet their budget instead of engaging in a stewardship program that grows faith and joy and deepens relationships with God. Now fund raisers can be fun. And they can do a lot of good. They are definitely worth doing. Forget the money for a moment; just think how impoverished Living Water would be without the annual auction or something very much like it. It's a great, community building event. But if you find yourself doing fund raiser after fund raiser until you are worn out with them and have no energy for ministry, then you have allowed a good thing to crowd out an excellent thing.

What are the excellent things *you* should be doing? What part of your personal mission is getting neglected? Let's narrow that down a bit. What is the *one thing* you could do that you're not doing now, that if you did it on a regular basis would make a tremendous positive difference in your life?

My guess is that that one thing falls into the category of important but not urgent. Exercise is rarely urgent, but it's pretty important. Prayer would be another one: rarely urgent, awfully important. Speaking of prayer, strengthening your primary relationships would be another. If it becomes urgent, working on it might be a little late.

Putting first things first means paying attention to those important but not urgent things and moving them up on your priority list. That means something else has to move down the list. And that's what makes this hard. But when we don't pay attention to first things, then our time and energy start to get filled up with emergencies. Churches find this to be true when, for example, they keep deferring maintenance because it's not urgent. And then one day, it becomes really urgent—and expensive. The same is true in your life and mine: neglect the first things and a crisis is sure to come. If you find that you are almost always in crisis mode, it may well be because you have neglected first things for too long.

It's going to take a lot of hard work to get out of continual crisis mode. You'll have to be willing to let Pharaoh go. And that can be tough because if you're in continual crisis mode, you're probably really stressed out. And when you're really stressed out, contemplating any change, even a positive one, just adds more stress. You're gonna have to decide to let Pharaoh go. What things are urgent but not important? Let 'em go. What things are really a waste of time. Let 'em go so that you can put time into first things.

So, in addition to putting down on paper that one you could do thing that would make a tremendous positive difference, you might also need to put down what you'll do less of so that you can attend to this more important thing.

The theology behind habit 1, Be Proactive, is that you are a created co-creator with God. You're not God, but you're not helpless. You have stewardship over your life. The theology behind Habit 2, Begin with the End in Mind, is that God is in charge of the end of your life, and God has it covered. You're a baptized child of God. So don't worry about that. Instead, think about what you would like family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and fellow church members say at your funeral. Those are your deepest values. Craft them into a personal mission statement to help you keep those values at the center of your life. And, oh, by the way, make sure those values are congruent with Kingdom of God values.

I don't see any theology behind habit #3. Habit #3 is about taking the stuff you've been thinking about in your head and putting down on paper and making it an actual part of your life. In the context of confession and forgiveness this would be called penance or amendment of life. Or it might be called sanctification, living a more holy life. It's work. Good work. Holy work.

The thing about Lutherans and good works is that we have this confidence, this expectation that good stuff will happen because the power for all this good stuff doesn't come from us but comes from God, from God's Holy Spirit working in us. Yeah, we've got some pretty serious effort to put in. But we have confidence that if we don't get in the way too much, God is going to bring about something *really* good.

What are your first things?