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What's So Great about a Balanced Life?

Why Abundance, Life to the Full, and Contentment Mean So Much More

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If you ask me, living a balanced life is overrated.

Don't get me wrong. Balance is something that we in our 21st-century American culture emphasize a lot. Yet I can't help but wonder if we're overemphasize the importance of balance in our lives. Should we, as individuals and as churches, really be as obsessed over living a balanced life as we are? Should we measure the success of our careers, our lives, and our holiness according to whether or not we achieve balance in our lives?

I don't think so.

After all, a word search of the entire NIV translation of the Bible reveals that the word *balance* is used only four times. In all four instances, the word is used in reference to money or a scale. Never once is it used to describe a lifestyle that we should try to attain.

What's more, the word *balance* never appears in the New Testament. When Jesus talked about who's blessed in the Beatitudes during his Sermon on the Mount, he didn't say "Blessed are the balanced."

In his parable of the talents in Matthew 25, when Jesus said, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" his commendation probably doesn't refer to how balanced this servant's life was.

When Jesus talked about our eternal judgment using the sheep and goats illustration in Matthew 25, no one gains or is denied entrance to heaven based on whether or not they've led a balanced life.

In light of this, perhaps our obsession with trying to achieve balanced lives is actually more cultural than biblical—and as such, rather than helping us grow in our faith perhaps in reality, striving for balance may actually hinder our walk with God and our kingdom impact.

I know it did for me.

As a rookie youth worker, I read and listened to anything and everything that I thought could help me become more effective. In doing so, I stumbled upon several people touting the benefits of living a balanced life. Such speakers challenged me to spend time each day with God, on my physical well being, on my work, with my students and leaders, and with my family. Most suggested I achieve this by becoming a master scheduler.

Which I did. I scheduled each day so I could spend time at work and at rest—with God, my students, and my husband. According to the experts, I lived a balanced life.

A balanced life that left me feeling empty. A balanced life that left me questioning my call to youth ministry and questioning whether or not it was even possible to be both a youth pastor and a wife. A balanced life that left me feeling exhausted and far from God.

In many ways, this advice to lead a balanced life failed me, my husband, and the kids whom I served. As a result, to maximize my effectiveness as a youth worker, I now focus a lot less on living a balanced life and a lot more on whether or not my life is glorifying and honoring God. No longer do I think the two are necessarily synonymous.

But what does it mean to live a life that glorifies and honors God?

Abundance, Not Balance

In the New American Standard translation of John 10:10, Jesus the Good Shepherd said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

This suggests that one way we can glorify and honor God is by living an abundant life—a life focused not just on going to heaven but on bringing heaven here to earth. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus said, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness."

That noted, perhaps our obsession with living a balanced life should rightfully be replaced with an obsession with God's Kingdom. Obsess over God by spending time with God and more importantly, by living like Christ by investing in people, and by identifying and meeting people's needs.

As a rookie youth worker, I believed obsessing over God's Kingdom meant pouring more and more time and energy into my youth ministry. This was especially true because my quest to live a balanced life resulted in my living a segregated life in which I compartmentalized each area of my life: Ministry, Family, Health, Fun, etc. Each of these compartments was entirely separate and distinct, with no overlap or connection between them. The result of this compartmentalization was tension in my life—especially between my family and my ministry.

What I now understand, but failed to realize then, is that the compartments in our lives are, in fact, related to one another. What affects

one also affects the others. Moreover, I now believe that everything in our lives has at least a spiritual component. As a result, my obsession over God's Kingdom no longer is limited to youth ministry. Instead, it carries over into my relationships with my family and friends. When my friend has a need and I meet it, I am bringing God's kingdom to earth in the same way I am when I meet a stranger's need or one my student's needs.

Quite naturally, this broader understanding about what's spiritual also makes trying to achieve a balanced life far less important to me than it used to be. After all, if everything is spiritual, then why must I separate and balance these different compartments within my life? If I believe that spending time with my husband and loving my family is actually serving God, that relaxing and playing means I'm pleasing and encountering God in some way, and that I can serve and glorify God both inside and outside of my youth ministry, then there's no longer any need for me to balance my spiritual journey with my health, ministry, and family.

This, in turn, greatly reduces the tension I used to feel being pulled between my family and ministry and the guilt that inevitably came from choosing one over the other.

Life to the Full, Not Balance

Another way we can glorify and honor God is by living every minute of our lives to the fullest. Rather than focusing on our ultimate destination, we take time to enjoy each step of our journey, too. We delight in the small things—the beauty of a sunset, the humor in God's creation, and the people whose paths we cross for both long and short periods of time. By doing this, we learn to seek and find God—even in the most unexpected places and through the most unexpected people.

When we live life to the fullest, our life becomes an adventure, similar to a ride on a roller coaster. Every roller coaster has a beginning, when you slowly ascend a hill; then moments at the summits where you pause and rest before plunging down the other side on an exhilarating journey that moves ahead full throttle; and moments after this exhilarating journey where you simply coast along, going wherever the path may lead.

So too is it when we live life to the fullest. At any given moment in this adventure we may face a new beginning, prepare for what lies ahead, rest briefly, move ahead full throttle, or coast along the path to wherever God leads us. Isolated and compartmentalized, these moments don't make for a balanced life. Yet, as we cycle through the natural seasons in this adventure, enjoying each moment and finding God in it, joy fills us and our lives glorify and honor God.

Contentment, Not Balance

Besides trying to live a life that glorifies and honors God now rather than focus on living a balanced life, I also try to live a content life.

But again, what exactly does it mean to live a content life?

Humorist Erma Bombeck understood what it means to be content when she said, "When I stand before God at the end of my life I would hope that I would have not a single bit of talent left and could say, 'I used everything you gave me.'"

I wholeheartedly believe that if, at the end of our lives, we can tell God, "I used everything you gave me," we will have lived a content life. After all, according to Ephesians 2:10, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

By giving us unique passions, talents, and gifts, God has both created and equipped us to do these good works. Contentment comes from discovering and using these gifts, something that also enables us to further glorify and honor God.

Interestingly enough, when we use our unique gifts, our lives often become unbalanced!

For example, I believe that God has blessed me with the gift of leadership. As a result, I naturally enjoy spending time investing in and developing adult and student leaders. Because I enjoy this and am gifted at it, I spend a disproportionate amount of my ministry time doing this. In contrast, I sorely lack the gift of evangelism and spend very little of my ministry time focusing on this. Though this results in my individual ministry being unbalanced and favoring leadership over evangelism, it leads to a contentment that comes from doing what God has equipped and called me to do.

Because we "are the body of Christ, and each one of us is a part of it," (2 Corinthians 12:27) though my unique gifts may make my personal ministry unbalanced, my overall ministry is not because others' gifts compliment my own. This ensures that even though our individual ministries may be unbalanced, our overall ministry does not suffer.

When we faithfully use the gifts that God has blessed us with, not only will we be content, but one day I believe we will also get to hear Jesus say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

The Result?

To conclude, I'd like to share a bit about my current life with you.

For the last two weeks, I traveled with my husband, mom, and in-laws across three countries. We were constantly on the go, and yet I thoroughly enjoyed it and discovered God in some truly surprising places. During those two weeks, I rarely thought about my youth ministry, yet I constantly obsessed over God's Kingdom.

Now I'm home, going full throttle for the next nine days as I finish preparing for my ministry's summer mission trip. During that weeklong trip, I'll work 20-hour days and spend little time focused on my family.

Following that, I'll take a week long vacation before finishing out my

responsibilities at my current ministry. I'll then take three weeks off during which I hope to do only the things I want to do—sleep, read, pray, scrapbook, and spend time with my husband and friends—before transitioning into my new ministry.

Right now my life is about as unbalanced as it can possibly get. Yet, right now I'm living an abundant life where I'm enjoying the journey, living every moment to its fullest, experiencing and encountering God in unexpected people and places, and using my gifts to serve God—both within and outside of my ministry.

The result? An imbalanced yet joyful and content life that I believe glorifies and honors God.