

“KEEPING THE BALANCE”

2. Home, Work and Church

Colossians 3:12 – 4:1

One of the most common cries in our society today is that there is just not enough time to do everything. Everyone, it seems, is finding life is just too full of activities, of responsibilities, of commitments. Even those of you who have retired from full-time employment seem to find your lives are filled with things that need to be done – from bowls matches to committee meetings, and from child-minding to prayer meetings. I’m not entirely sure there ever was a golden age when everyone moved leisurely through life and spent their weekends and evenings trying to think of things to do, but it certainly does seem a lot more pressured these days. And, as with so many of the issues which confront us in life, being a Christian just seems to make it worse. There’s yet one more factor to put into the equation. Everyone else has to deal with the apparently competing demands of work, friends, family, leisure and home – which seems more than enough for most people – but we have to add church and other sundry good works to the list. How are we supposed to cope?

It’s another of those areas where we need to examine the balance we keep between the various parts of our lives. Last week, you may recall, we looked at the balance we need to strike between personal and collective responsibility. Next time I’m here we’ll look at the balance to be struck between truth and love. Today, though, we’re going to grapple with the ways we can try to achieve a balance between **home, work and church**. Now, as we often do, we’re using those terms as a kind of shorthand for the three main areas of competition for our time and energy. By **home** I mean the demands of family, of marriage, of leisure – all those things that are not included under work or church. By **work** I mean the responsibilities that we have to others – to employers, colleagues and so on – and the needs we have to fulfil. You may have retired from paid employment, but there are still certain responsibilities you need to fulfil which take up time – shopping for basic necessities or doing your washing, for example. And by **church** I mean all those things that seem especially and distinctively Christian – Sunday worship, midweek meetings, other ministries you may have.

All of those things make demands on us – some are forced upon us; some we have taken up voluntarily. And in order to fulfil those demands we have finite resources with which to work – 24 hours in each day, reserves of energy limited by our age and health, a finite income, specific material, intellectual and emotional limitations. It would be great if we had more, if there were some scientific way of stretching time or some legal way of increasing our bank balance – but there isn’t. So we are forced to strike a balance in our lives in order, literally, to stay sane and to keep healthy. All of us make decisions day by day as to how we are going to keep all these things going, decisions which are influenced by other people – our family, our boss, our government; which are influenced by societal pressures – what is the “done thing” in a particular situation; which are influenced by feelings of guilt – particularly in the field of church activity where, above all, we very often do things because we think we’re supposed to.

The ways in which we order our lives, the time and energy and resources we devote to each area, reflect our priorities. For example, the person for whom sports and leisure are a high priority will spend a great deal of time and money and energy on club subscriptions, working out and practising. The person for whom a comfortable home is a high priority will spend a great deal of time and money and energy on DIY and on visits to IKEA. Those are caricatures, I know, but you get the drift, I hope. We all find ways of ordering, balancing our lives, in the ways that suit us best. But it can be a struggle. And when we talk about balance – in this or any other area – we do not mean that everything is given equal weight or that we steer a middle way through everything. That way lies both mediocrity and danger. It used to be said of the Liberal Democrats, when they spoke of themselves as being a “middle of the road” party, that those who walk in the middle of the road are the most likely to get knocked down. We are talking about achieving some kind of harmony, where the apparently competing demands of our lives all mesh together in a way that allows us to get the very best out of our lives, just as God intends for us.

In the passage we read earlier from *Colossians 3*, we find Paul talking about allowing “*the peace of Christ to rule in your hearts.*” The situation he is addressing is specifically one in which the competing demands of a number of different factions within the church are causing trouble for the Colossians, but what he says has a wider application, I believe. We are encouraged to find a way of life in which we can experience the peace of Christ, in which we can know that wholeness and well-being that, for Paul the Jew, is implicit in the word “*peace*”, the Hebrew word for which is “*shalom*”. Of course, Paul is writing here in Greek, but behind the word he uses is that whole concept of “*shalom*”.

And the word that is translated “*rule*” here is not a word meaning “rule over” or “proclaim sovereignty over”. It’s actually a word that appears nowhere else in the New Testament and is taken from the world of sport. The word, for what it’s worth, is *brabeuw*, and it refers to the umpire or referee. Paul is saying that we should allow the peace of Christ to be the umpire in our busy and complex lives. William Barclay has this to say about this verse: “*The way to right action is to appoint Jesus Christ as the arbiter between the conflicting emotions in our hearts; and if we accept his decisions, we cannot go wrong.*” That’s easily said, though, isn’t it? But how do we actually accomplish that?

Well, *v16* has some help on that score. Keeping in touch with the word of God is vital. The more deeply we are immersed in the teaching and example of Jesus himself, the more easy we might find it to cope with all that is going on in our lives. Keep looking at Jesus. Read the gospels. Learn from his example and apply it to your own situation. But don’t do that in isolation. Paul writes here of the corporate life of the Christian community – “*teaching, admonishing, worshipping*”. We need to share our concerns with one another. Ask for advice. Explore the possibilities with others. Share how you have coped. As we saw last week, we’re all in this together.

But as we also saw last week, we have a personal responsibility, too. Maybe you need to look at your own priorities. Many people will spend time each month or each year working out their financial budget – how much money will be spent on food, clothes, holidays, etc. We ask ourselves how much we want something, how much we are prepared to pay, how important it is in our life, what our priorities are. But how many of us regularly sit down and think about how we budget our other resources – our time, our energy, our gifts and abilities? When we look at the things which occupy our time and use up our resources, we need to be asking questions. And the most important question about each activity ought to be “Why am I doing this?” If we can answer that question honestly, we can start to see a pattern to our priorities. Look at the things which you do under the headings of home, work and church. Why are you doing them? It might be a sense of duty – but to whom? It might be to further yourself and your own agenda. There might be pressure from others. It might be something which you really enjoy doing. You might be doing it to glorify God. There could be all kinds of answers. But when you ask those questions, if you are not satisfied with the answers you are giving, then maybe you need to take a closer look at the priority you are giving that activity.

But whatever the outcome, it is your responsibility. I’m afraid there is no one-size-fits-all checklist here this morning. I cannot tell you what you should or shouldn’t be doing with your life. There’s no seven step plan to achieving a beautifully balanced life – despite what the Christian publishers would like us to believe. It goes back to what Paul says in *Romans 14:12* – “*Each of us will give an account of himself to God.*” When he wrote to the Christians in Corinth about the way they used their financial resources, specifically in giving to God’s work, he said “*Each person should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver*” (*2 Corinthians 9:7*). What he’s saying is, “Think about it all. Decide carefully where you are going to allocate your time and resources.” In that way, you avoid giving God the left-over change in your pockets, the dog-ends of your life, the few minutes that no-one else has claimed. If you think about it, you can ensure that there is sufficient time to spend with your family or your friends. If you’re prepared to put some thought into it, you can ensure that your daily job does not take over your life completely.

And part of doing all that is recognising that it is your responsibility – not in any heavy kind of way that puts even more pressure on you, but in a way that says you are not prepared to live your life according to someone else's imposed agenda. And that is particularly important with regard to church. In *Romans 14:13*, Paul says, "*Let us stop passing judgement on one another*". How often do we find ourselves getting involved in church activities because we're worried what other people might be thinking about us? And how often do we find ourselves sitting there at a poorly attended meeting and thinking – or, indeed, saying – that there should be certain other people there? Let's not judge. We all have different lives, different circumstances. That person might not be at the prayer meeting because they're serving the wider church at a meeting elsewhere. There might be only a few people at a service because some of those who are missing have decided that time with their family is important before a busy week of travelling abroad on business. You might never see one particular person at a meeting because he or she goes to all the meetings you are never at. Don't judge other people by what you see of them and you might find you feel less pressure on yourself – because you're not then worrying about what others are saying about you all the time.

Now a lot of what we've said so far is the kind of advice you could get anywhere – some handy hints that might or might not have anything specifically Christian about them. You're thinking, "This is Rob Parsons without the jokes!" Well, apart from the fact that I believe God works through the common sense which he gave us as human beings, let me point you towards one underlying principle in all of this. And it's to be found in the chapter we read earlier, *Colossians 3*. It's something Paul obviously thought was very important because he says it twice in six verses.

Look at *v17,23,24*. He's not talking about balance in the sense of dividing everything up equally. He's said that we can achieve some kind of harmony, some kind of peace in our lives by allowing Jesus to help us set the agenda. And therefore, in whatever we do, we are to go at it full pelt because we're doing it for God. Whatever you do, do it as a follower of Jesus and do it to the very best of your ability. Sit down with your list of questions which we mentioned above – Why am I doing this? What's my motivation? Where are my priorities? – and then say, "OK. So how can I do this to the glory of God?" The end of *v24* says, "*It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*" Now that's not some kind of little caveat that allows you to do anything you want, so long as you say you're doing it for Jesus. Spurgeon once famously said, in response to the remarks of a particularly abrasive American preacher who had condemned the use of tobacco, knowing that Spurgeon enjoyed a good smoke, "*I am going to smoke a cigar to the glory of God.*" It's a recognition that Christ should be in everything we do day by day. R P Martin, the New Testament scholar, writes as follows: "*The name of the Lord Jesus is not a magical formula to be thoughtlessly appended to prayer. Nor is it anything to do with mystical fellowship. Nor ... liturgical praxis ... It embraces the whole of life.*" And another writer, Geoffrey Wilson, says: "*This brief command offers a more comprehensive guide to Christian living than any that could be provided by the heaviest tome of moral casuistry.*"

That balance, that sense of peace can be achieved – but you have to work at it, and keep working at it. Look at what you are doing. Question your priorities. And ask to what extent you are doing it for God. Ask yourself how you can use that for God's glory and how it meshes with the other areas of your life to produce a rounded whole. I'm not suggesting it will be easy. There may be some very difficult decisions: possibly a point at which you have to say "That's got to go – it won't fit and it's not really what Jesus wants me to do." Keep praying about it and don't be afraid to talk to others about it.

And don't forget that what you are doing you are doing by the grace of God. Paul tells these Colossian Christians, "*do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*" It is God who has given you the gifts of time and resources and talents that you use in your own unique way to fulfil his purposes in your life, and to contribute to the building of his Kingdom in this world. Thank him for what you've got and for the contexts in which you can use it all. As you start to recognise the hand of God on your life, as you listen to the words and learn from the example of Jesus, as you grow day by day

in your experience of the Holy Spirit, so you will begin to see the ways in which you can achieve the balance you need in your own situation, and know the peace of Christ in your heart.