6 Lessons for Tending Your Time

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I love productivity. I read authors like Cal Newport and Laura Vanderkam, and I listen to podcasts like Organize 365 and Before Breakfast and The Lazy Genius. I've collected tips and tricks and habits and goals. I really want to steward my time well—to live a life that is purposeful and effective while it glorifies God.

But all those tips can end up making me feel anxious. Because the truth is, I'm not productive all the time. I have slow days, interrupted days, lazy days. I get tired in the afternoons. I get distracted by social media. And then I feel guilty and anxious about not doing my best with every minute.

And some days, even when I do it "right" and use every minute efficiently, I can end the day exhausted and crabby.

You ever feel like that? Like you can't win with your schedule? Like you're swinging between laziness and frenetic activity?

Maybe you're looking, like I was, for a better relationship with time.

Right Amount of Time

I was a homeschooling mom when I finally began to grasp just how perfectly God made the world. We're the exact right distance from the sun, with just the right amount of warmth and light. We have the exact right atmosphere—not only for breathing but for protecting us from the cold of space and radiation of the sun. We have the exact right amount of gravity, the exact right soil for growing crops, the exact right amount of water in our water cycle. We have the right plants, the right animals, the right bodies.

Everything is a constraint, to be sure: we can't breathe in outer space. We can't grow crops on Mars. We'd be scorched to death on Venus. We have to live here, but it isn't a prison. Earth is perfectly designed for us.

Isn't time the same way? God has clearly marked days inside of weeks inside of seasons. Those are our perfect limits: Scientific research verifies that our bodies do best with about seven to eight hours of sleep every night. Our optimal workweek is around eight hours a day: If we do more than 38 hours of work a week, we start to feel starved for time. More than 50 and our productivity dives.

A seven-day week—the standard of time set out in Genesis—is so ingrained that when USSR tried a five-day week, and when France tried an eight-day week, both were total disasters.

If our days and weeks and years are created by God as a good gift, as right for us as clean air and vegetables, how does that change the way we use them?

Too Loose or Too Tight

I grew up in Iowa, where I spent more time looking at cornfields than looking at my calendar. The way a farmer behaves his field, much like the way we behave with time, can fall into two extremes—holding it too loosely or holding it too tightly.

A field held too loosely has fallen fallow, with rocks and weeds springing up to choke out the harvest. A day or a season held too loosely is frittered away, wasted with poor planning or too many hours drained on video games or scrolling social media.

On the other hand, a field held too tightly is overcultivated, fertilized with too many chemicals, or planted over and over until the nutrients are depleted and the soil worn out. A day can also be held too tightly—we can schedule too much, wringing economic productivity out of every spare moment, leaving no room for rest or for God's Spirit to bring an unexpected opportunity.

Instead, with both our gardens and our days, we should aim for nourishing and flourishing, for cultivating healthy productivity. What can us schedulers learn from farmers and gardeners?

Lessons from the Land

1. Planning

Nobody plants a field by tossing out handfuls of seed willy-nilly (unless you want to lose half your crop to birds or rocky soil). Instead, farmers carefully match plants to different types of soil and track what does well where.

We can do the same thing with planning our time. We already match some things—we worship in church on Sunday, we generally work during the days Monday through Friday, maybe we have movie nights on Fridays when we're worn out.

With a little observation, we can carry that further: maybe you can match focused tasks with the times you feel the most energy (10 a.m., for most of us). Or you can match administrative tasks with a time when you're feeling less energy (Thursday afternoons, anyone?). Time management expert Laura Vanderkam recommends doing weekly planning on Friday afternoons, when work activities are generally wrapping up. And if you want people to show up for your meetings, aim for Tuesdays at 2:30 p.m.

2. Plowing

If you've ever plowed a field (or tried to do anything in a straight line for a long time), you know that starting correctly is crucial. If you're off in the beginning, even by a little, your trajectory sends you in an increasingly wrong direction.

Our days also need to start well. I don't want to be legalistic—the Bible doesn't command morning quiet times—but those who spend time with the Lord first thing testify that it sets the tone for their days. And it doesn't stop there. Farmers (without autosteer) keep their

eyes on a distant target to help them continue in a straight line. We too can keep our eyes on the Lord all day long, constantly realigning our hearts with worship. If you've ever paused in your day to quiet your heart with prayer or singing, you know the power of readjusting your focus and refreshing your soul.

3. Weeding

Ever since Eden, we've been battling weeds. Gardeners and farmers use all manner of ways to get rid of them—pulling by hand, mulching, hoeing, spraying with chemicals. The only thing you can't do is ignore weeds because they never go away on their own.

Our time, too, benefits from attentive pruning. It's not that the things that crowd our calendars are bad. But each new commitment takes up space and energy, and unless we keep reminding ourselves of what we're about—and which activities support that—then it's easy to lose the soil of our weekends and evenings to weeds. Just like the yellow tufts of dandelions and the purple blooms of thistles, the things that choke out our time don't always look harmful at first glance. They may even be beautiful. But they aren't what we set out to cultivate. So, they have to go.

We can push that analogy down farther into our mornings and afternoons. While we definitely need to take rest breaks, it's easy to lose time to endless email checks or to unproductive waiting. Being attentive is the best way to spot and prune the weeds in our schedules.

4. Fertilizing

Crops grow by taking nutrients out of the ground. The soil is replenished when those crops die and decompose—unless those crops are taken away to be eaten by people. So, farmers use fertilizers such as compost, manure, and chemicals to replenish the soil with nutrients.

In the same way, we can use good habits to work energy back into the moments of our days. Our tasks naturally deplete us, and we know there are activities that don't help to replenish us—a late-night Netflix binge, scrolling too long on Instagram, or eating candy for breakfast. But there are also habits that do fill us up—getting to bed on time, having a consistent morning routine, singing worship songs in the car, reading a chapter in a book, writing in a thankfulness journal at lunch, walking for 20 minutes in the afternoon, talking with family over a nutritious dinner. There are dozens of healthy ways we can boost the production of our days.

5. Rain

Nothing is more frustrating than bad weather for a person who's itching to get their hands (or their tractors) into the dirt. Rain derails the day's plans—but on the flip side, it's also crucial to the growing process.

Our daily plans can also be derailed—by a colleague who hasn't responded to our question, or by a household with COVID, or by an unexpected twist in events. It's easy to feel stumped or frustrated, especially when it's impossible to see how God is using that for our good (Rom.

8:28). But what if we followed the example of a gardener and wrestled through our disappointment, gave thanks for the rain, and then pivoted to another task?

6. Gleanings

Leviticus provides some of the earliest written farming advice: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest… You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 19:9–10).

When you schedule your tasks, meetings, and appointments one after another, leaving just enough time to get from one to the next, you're harvesting your day right up to the edges. If you've done this, you know how stressful it can be and how impatient you can become with anybody who slows you down.

But when you leave yourself some space, you have gleanings of time available for those unexpected conversations with colleagues or children. Productivity experts call this *margin*. You can take time to ask how a friend is doing, exclaim over a child's artwork, or offer to drive someone home after your shift. Time gleanings relax the pace of your day, which lets you share them with others.

God Is in Control

I could keep going with this analogy—we need to be careful which seeds we plant with our time, mindful of the fruit they yield. We need to schedule breaks, not out of laziness, but knowing that rested soil produces more and better crops. And when we harvest a season of fruitful scheduling, it's good to take the time to celebrate the accomplishments God has given us.

But the most important comparison is this: We are not in control.

I grew up in Iowa, but I've never met a cocky farmer. Farmers know that no matter how carefully they plan, or how straight they plow, or how energetically they weed and fertilize, there is nothing they can do to guarantee a good harvest. God brings the rain and the sunshine. He causes the corn or soybeans or wheat to sprout and flourish. There aren't many other careers where the inability of the workers to produce results is so obvious.

In our lives, too, we can schedule and plan, block our time and use the Pomodoro method, but only God brings forth the fruit of our labor. We should steward time as well as we can, while holding our days with open hands, knowing that God alone is directing our steps.

In this new year, may our time be well-nourished and flourishing, giving glory to the One who gave us just the right amount. Soli Deo gloria.