

Skimming – part two

By Pete Scazzero

“Skimming” in leadership can produce the impression that everything is covered – but in reality, you aren’t completely there. You’re covering ground superficially without being fully engaged. In the last issue, we looked at the signs of skimming and how it can hinder ministry. In this issue, I’ll share what I learned from skimming in four critical areas: with God, with myself, in marriage, and in leadership.

Skimming with God

Cultivating a life with our Lord Jesus requires large amounts of focused time. Days alone with God, hours of meditation on Scripture, and time for reading are indispensable. Yet we are surrounded by endless distractions and voices that call us away from sitting at the feet of Jesus like Mary did in Luke 10.

Throughout church history, one of the seven deadly sins has been sloth (*acedia*, “not caring”), which is described not just as laziness, but as busyness with the wrong things. We are busy, spiritual guides have argued, because we cannot bear the effort demanded by a life of solitude with God.

The Desert Fathers repeatedly warned about being engaged in activity for God before the time is ripe. They offer a timely warning to us.

So, in order to stop skimming in my relationship with God, I started building into my life monastic rhythms. For example, I began practicing the Daily Office as a way to structure my days. I began planning my day around three to four small blocks of time to stop, center, read Scripture, and be still. I also became ruthless about days of silence as indispensable elements of my vocation as a pastor.

It is an illusion to imagine that we can lead our people on a spiritual journey we have not taken. No program can substitute for the superficiality and self-will that inevitably permeates our ministry when we skim in our relationship with God.

Skimming with ourselves

Most of us are overscheduled and preoccupied; we are starved for time, exhausted from the endless needs around us. Who has time to enjoy Jesus, our spouses, our children, life itself?

We assume we’ll catch up on our sleep some other time. The space we need for replenishing our soul and relaxing can happen later. Few of us have time for fun and hobbies. There is simply too much work for God to be done.

Jesus models for us healthy self care. With the weight of the world on his shoulders, we observe him resting and enjoying what others bring to him before going to the cross (John 12:1-8).

Bernard of Clairvaux, like Augustine before him, recognized that mature love does not exist without a basis of self love. Unless we know what it is to care for ourselves, we can't love others well. Only in light of the love of God can we love ourselves rightly. Bernard even argued that love of self for God's sake is the highest form of loving God.

This is a wonderful word for us as leaders today as so many of us often carry resentments for giving beyond what God has asked. Unrelenting duty can destroy the joy of the Lord, which is our strength.

A key to our freedom is a rediscovery of Sabbath-keeping, a radical, countercultural spiritual formation practice. I accept God's invitation to stop, rest, delight, and contemplate him for a 24-hour period weekly. For me, this means stopping from Friday night at 7:00 p.m. to Saturday night at 7:00 p.m. – even if my sermon is not finished. I stop all “have-tos” and “shoulds.” I avoid the computer, e-mails, and church related work. I spend the day on Friday doing my other work, such as cleaning the house, repairing the car, laundry, and paying bills.

The Sabbath calls us to build the doing of nothing into our schedules each week. Nothing measurable is accomplished. It is, by the world's standards, inefficient, unproductive, and useless. Yet is one of the most fundamental elements given to us by God that we might take care of ourselves.

Skimming in marriage

Few people are willing to admit the sad state of many pastors' marriages. It would potentially disrupt, at least in the short term, some of our fastest-growing churches.

The best leadership and denominational conferences, along with our seminaries and schools, do not train us how to have marriages that point to heaven. We ignore the unique pressures of the ministry, mistakenly assuming that a great marriage will happen naturally if we work for God.

We forget the biblical principle: as goes the leader's marriage, so goes the church. If we're skimming at home, we're not going to be able to lead a healthy church family (1 Timothy 3:5).

If you are married, your vocation is your spouse first, and any children God has given you. This covenant takes priority over our church and people.

Paul refers to the one-flesh union of husband and wife as a foreshadowing of Christ's union with his bride, the church (Ephesians 5:31-32). For this reason our marriage and

sexuality are meant to proclaim and reflect our union with Christ. Our marital union is to be a picture, and experience, of receiving and giving the love of God.

Who has time to invest in such a learning/growth journey?

Some pastors will say, "Pete, this would require me to change the entire way I do ministry." Yes!

Geri and I made a commitment 13 years ago that investing in our marriage was the highest priority of our lives after Christ. Our calendar began to reflect that change. We carved out exclusive, uninterrupted time each day and week to be fully present with one another. And we began regular overnights to nearby bed and breakfasts for getaways.

Of course, the temptation to skim on our marriage remains. But as our theology of marriage as a vocation – as a specific call and mission from God – has deepened over the years, the temptation has weakened.

Skimming in leadership

Part of the reason I skimmed in leadership is that I divided the secular and sacred, treating the executive functions of pastoral leadership as less meaningful and holy than prayer and Bible study.

For years I preferred to do the easy things, not the necessary things. I don't enjoy conflict and tension. Who does?

When I stopped skimming, I began to see how much of my life was driven by external validation, that other people would tell me I was OK. Volunteers and staff didn't move toward me after difficult conversations about their performance. They distanced themselves from me.

I sometimes avoided meetings I knew would be hard. I skimmed on truth when it was uncomfortable. I preferred to not ask difficult questions or speak up when something was clearly wrong.

Over time I learned that:

- It's easy to rush into a staff meeting without planning. It's hard to spend the time needed to get clear on goals and agenda.
- It's easy to be reactive instead of thoughtful and prayerful. (More of my decisions than I care to admit were based on feelings and impulse.) It's hard to provide prudent leadership.

- It's easy to say one thing and do another. It's hard to remain centered and follow through on commitments.
- It's easy to gloss over inconsistencies. It's hard to examine painful data.
- It's easy to engage in false peace by appeasing people. It's hard to speak truth when someone may become angry.
- It's easy to justify spin and exaggeration as vision. It's hard to combine faith and facts.

In all areas of our lives, we need to remember our goal – people's transformation into the likeness of Christ. Loving people does not mean keeping them happy. Jesus models for us that hurting people is often part of helping them mature.

Leadership that does not skim sets us and our people free – even if it is painful at first.