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Hello, My Name Is Busy

I am the worst possible person to write this book.
And maybe the best.
My life is crazy busy. I don’t say that as a boast or a brag.
I’m not trying to win any contest. I’m just stating the facts.
Or at least describing the way my life feels almost every single day.
I often made the quip, “I’m supposed to write a book on busyness, if only I could find the time.” And I wasn’t joking.

How did I get this way? How did you get this way? How did we all get this way? I’ve yet to meet anyone in America who responds to the question “How are you?” with the reply, “Well for starters, I’m not very busy.” I suppose there must be a six-year-old somewhere out there who doesn’t “have anything to do” and some dear folks at the nursing home who could use a few more interruptions, but for almost everyone in between there is a pervasive sense of being unrelentingly filled up and stressed out.

I do not write this book as one who has reached the summit and now bends over to throw the rope down to everyone else. More like the guy with a toehold three feet off the ground,
looking for my next grip. I’m writing this book not because I know more than others but because I want to know more than I do. I want to know why life feels the way it does, why our world is the way it is, why I am the way I am. And I want to change.

Same Kind of Busy as You

As long as I can remember—which takes us back aeons and aeons, all the way to the 90s—I have been busy. In high school I ran track and cross-country, played intramural basketball, did National Honor Society, tried the Spanish club, took multiple AP courses, played in our insanely time-consuming marching band, sang in a musical, and did church twice on Sunday, Sunday school, youth group, and a Friday morning Bible study. No one made me like this. My parents didn’t force me (though church was not up for discussion). I wanted to do all these things.

In college I did even more. I ran a season of track, played intramural sports, worked part-time for various professors, organized one of the country’s largest Model UN programs (yes, it’s true), signed up to be a DJ at the campus radio station, led our Fellowship of Christian Students group, went to voluntary chapel three times a week, sang in a church choir, sang in the college chapel choir, participated in my church’s college ministry, helped with Boys’ Brigade on Wednesday nights, went to church on Sunday morning, then Sunday school, then evening church, then chapel back on campus late into the night.

Same story in seminary. In addition to normal course work and wading through my denomination’s labyrinthine ordination process, I interned at my church, preached regularly, sang
in up to three different choirs at the same time, went to an accountability group every week, did the usual with church twice on Sunday, plus Sunday school, plus a midweek catechism class I taught for little kids, plus leading the seminary’s missions committee and attending chapels and frequent prayer meetings. I could go on and on.

And this is before I was really busy. The only people busier than single grad students are people who aren’t single and aren’t grad students. All those years in school, except for one semester, I wasn’t married. I wasn’t in full-time pastoral ministry. I wasn’t blogging or writing books. I wasn’t leading elders’ meetings. I wasn’t speaking anywhere. I wasn’t a slave to technology. I didn’t have a mortgage to figure out or a lawn to mow or a furnace to fix or a dead raccoon in my fireplace (long story) or weekly sermons to prepare. I didn’t have to travel. I didn’t have Facebook or Twitter. Hardly anyone e-mailed me. And I wasn’t parenting a child, let alone five.

On most days, my responsibilities, requirements, and ambitions add up to much more than I can handle. It has since I was a teenager, and only seems to be getting worse. When someone asks me how I’m doing, my response almost always includes the word “busy.” I can think of several moments in just the past couple of months when I’ve muttered to myself, “What am I doing? How did I get myself into this mess? When will I ever get my life under control? How long can I keep this up? Why can’t I manage my time? Why did I say yes to this? How did I get so busy?” I’ve bemoaned my poor planning and poor decision making. I’ve complained about my schedule. I’ve put in slipshod work because there wasn’t time for any other
kind. I’ve missed too many quiet times and been too impatient with my kids. I’ve taken my wife for granted and fed important relationships with leftovers. I’ve been too busy to pursue God with my whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In other words, I’ve likely been just like you.

**An Idea Whose Time Was Overdue**

“So, Kevin, what’s your next book project?” my friends would ask.

“I’m doing a book on busyness.”

“Really?! But your schedule is a mess. This is one of your biggest problems.”

“I know. That’s why I’m writing the book.”

Some books are written because the author knows something people need to know. Others because the author has seen something people should see. I’m writing this book to figure out things I don’t know and to work on change I have not yet seen. More than any other book I’ve worked on, this one is for me.

Which also means the book will have more about me than usual. I don’t know any other way to write on a topic that has been such a personal struggle except to make this book very personal. There is nothing remarkable about my experiences such that they need to be shared. It just so happens they are the experiences I know best. So you’re going to get a candid look at some of my faults, some of my struggles, and some of the insights—commonsense and biblical—that have helped me make sense of my heart issues.
I have two hesitations in writing a book like this, and both stem from pride. On the one hand, I’m going to put aside the urge to constantly qualify my struggles with reassurances that things aren’t quite so bad as they sound. In one sense, that’s true. I have a happy marriage and love being a dad. I’m not burnt out. I’m not fifty pounds overweight. I sleep at night. I have friends. There are people in my life to keep me accountable. This book is not a cry for help.

Except that it is. I want to grow in this area. I don’t want to keep up this same pace for the rest of my life. Frankly, I probably can’t. My life may not be spinning out of control, but it’s probably spinning too fast and a bit wobbly.

My second hesitation is just the opposite. I worry that you’ll think I’m parading my busyness as a badge of honor. If you don’t think I’m messed up for having these issues in the first place, you might think I’m proud for talking about them at all. “Must be nice to speak at conferences, Rev Kev. Must be pretty sweet to have people asking you to write books. Nice name drop, Pastor—wish those guys were knocking down my door. Thanks for sharing all your terrible burdens with us.”

I understand the sentiment. When some people talk about busyness it sounds like the lantern-jawed zillionaire quarterback complaining about all the photo shoots he has lined up. I really hope I don’t sound like That Guy—the one who expects sympathy every time he tells his sob story about how much worse the Milan airport is compared to Prague. As far as I can discern my heart, I’m not proud to be busy and I’m not proud of the things that make me busy. To be sure, pride is connected in other ways, but not in the sharing of the struggles themselves.
Besides, when it comes down to it, we are all busy in the same sorts of ways. Whether you are a pastor, a parent, or a pediatrician, you likely struggle with the crushing weight of work, family, exercise, bills, church, school, friends, and a barrage of requests, demands, and desires. No doubt, some people are quantitatively less busy than others and some much more so, but that doesn’t change the shared experience: most everyone I know feels frazzled and overwhelmed most of the time.

That’s what the people in my church are like. That’s what my friends around the country are like. That’s what I am like. And that’s why I’m writing this book.

**Worlds Apart?**

I read an anecdote once about a woman from another culture who came to the United States and began to introduce herself as “Busy.” It was, after all, the first thing she heard when meeting any American. *Hello, I’m Busy*—she figured it was part of our traditional greeting, so she told everyone she met that that’s who she was.

It’s what most of us are, and what more of us are becoming. No matter where we live or what our background. Granted, there are important differences in how people understand time. I’m well aware that this book assumes a modernized, industrialized cultural context. I know it assumes a Western view of time, and that an African book on busyness might include different prescriptions and contain many insights I’ve missed. To that end, I trust you will distinguish in these pages between practical application (which may differ across cultures) and biblical principles and diagnoses (which
do not). Efficiency and punctuality, for example, can demonstrate respect for others, but they are not absolute virtues. Just ask the man on the Jericho Road.

But we all live somewhere and must swim in the water around us. I can’t help but deal with the realities of life as I experience them in the United States. While it may limit the effectiveness of this book in some contexts, it seemed best not to take off my Western lenses, both because I probably couldn’t and because the world, for better or worse, will only grow more globalized, urbanized, and busy in the years ahead. Many other cultures are not as obsessed with minutes and seconds as we are, but for most of us, that’s the world we inhabit. For the rest, it’s the world that’s coming.

**Paint by Numbers**

I hope you’ll find this book highly practical and accessibly theological. That’s the book I set out to write because that’s the book I’d want to read. In these pages, I don’t plumb the depths of union with Christ, eschatological foreshadowing, and the interpretive history of the fourth commandment. That’s not the kind of book you’re reading. At the same time, I’m not interested merely in giving time management techniques or tips on how to set your e-mail filter. I want to understand what’s going on in the world and in my heart to make me feel the way I do. And I also want to understand how to change—even just a little. Both tasks require theology. And both are begging for practicality.

The outline of this book is straightforward. If you want a poem or a chalk drawing about busyness, you won’t find it
here. But if you prefer a clear outline with lists, I’m your man. My outline is as simple as three numbers: 3, 7, and 1: three dangers to avoid (chapter 2), seven diagnoses to consider (chapters 3–9), and one thing you must do (chapter 10). I don’t promise total transformation. I offer no money-back guarantees. My goal is more modest. I hope you’ll find a few ways to tackle your schedule, several suggestions for reclaiming your sanity, and a lot of encouragement to remember your soul.

All of which is to say, I hope you find in reading this book exactly what I’m looking for in writing it.
Here, There, and Gone: Three Dangers to Avoid

It’s not the most famous story in the Bible, but it is one of the strangest. At the end of 1 Kings 20 we meet a man who comes up with an unusual plan for rebuking Israel’s king. God’s people were at war with Syria, and God was granting them military success. But Ahab was a wicked, petulant, cowardly king. Just when God gave the Syrian king, Ben-hadad, into his hands, Ahab agreed to let him go for a few bazaars in Damascus. The gesture may sound magnanimous to us, but Ahab’s selfish little bargain put all of Israel in danger and dishonored the Lord.

So a certain man of the sons of the prophets devised a plan. He would go to the king dressed like a servant returning from battle. The first step was to look the part, so the unnamed prophet ordered a fellow prophet, at the command of the Lord, to strike him. Somewhat understandably, this second fellow did not oblige, which led to his untimely death at the hands of a lion (I told you it was a strange story). So the prophet found
another man and also implored him, “Strike me, please.” This time the man struck and wounded him.

Now the prophet was ready to go the king. Fresh with these self-inflicted bruises, the man disguised himself with a bandage over his eyes and told the king a story: “I’ve just come from the battle,” he said, “and I need to tell you something. A soldier brought me a man and ordered me to guard him with my life. Well, one thing led to another, and I must have got distracted with something else and, um, the man got away.”

Of course, the king was furious: “Just as you said: this negligence will cost you your life.” Then the prophet removed the bandage, revealed his true identity, and rebuked the king for letting Ben-hadad go free when God wanted him dead. Not a smart move. Disobedience would cost Ahab his life, just as he ironically said it should.

My point in recounting this obscure incident is not to encourage you to punch each other in the face. I mention this story so we can underline what the prophet-turned-pretend-guard says to the king in explaining how his man got away: “And as your servant was busy here and there, he was gone” (1 Kings 20:40). I realize 1 Kings 20 is not trying to tackle the problem of busyness, but the line in verse 40 strikes me as a perfect description for our age. We are here and there and everywhere. We are distracted. We are preoccupied. We can’t focus on the task in front of us. We don’t follow through. We don’t keep our commitments. We are so busy with a million pursuits that we don’t even notice the most important things slipping away.
Confession Is Good for the Soul

You and I have a problem. Most mornings, we drag ourselves out of bed, start the day’s routine, and hope against hope that we can simply hold our ground. Maybe we can keep the house in only a mild state of disaster. Maybe we can break even on the to-do list. Maybe no one else will get sick. Maybe the inbox won’t get any fuller. Maybe we won’t fall asleep after lunch. Maybe, just maybe, we can get enough done in the next eighteen hours to beat back the beast of busyness and live to see another day. We wake up most days not trying to serve, just trying to survive.

In his book *The Busy Christian’s Guide to Busyness*, Tim Chester suggests twelve diagnostic questions to determine how ill we’ve become with “hurry sickness.”¹ I can imagine how we’d answer each question in our church small groups. And then I can imagine how we’d really respond:

1. “Do you regularly work thirty minutes a day longer than your contracted hours?”
   *What does that have to do with anything? I have a lot to do, so I have to work a lot of hours.*

2. “Do you check work e-mails and phone messages at home?”
   *Are you serious? Have you been around much this millennium?*

3. “Has anyone ever said to you, ‘I didn’t want to trouble you because I know how busy you are’?”

Of course! And I’m glad they have the decency to respect my time!

4. “Do your family or friends complain about not getting time with you?”
   Well, I wouldn’t call it complaining per se. They’re still learning that quality time is more important than quantity time.

5. “If tomorrow evening were unexpectedly freed up, would you use it to do work or a household chore?”
   Uh, yeah. Were you going to do it for me?

6. “Do you often feel tired during the day or do you find your neck and shoulders aching?”
   Mountain Dew, ibuprofen, not a problem.

7. “Do you often exceed the speed limit while driving?”
   Depends on whether I’m trying to eat French fries at the same time.

8. “Do you make use of any flexible working arrangements offered by your employers?”
   Definitely. I work at home. I work in the car. I work on vacation. I can work pretty much anywhere.

9. “Do you pray with your children regularly?”
   I never turn them down when they ask.

10. “Do you have enough time to pray?”
    I’m more a “pray continually” kind of person. I don’t need to set aside specific times to pray because I’m always in communion with God.

11. “Do you have a hobby in which you are actively involved?”
    Does Pinterest count?

12. “Do you eat together as a family or household at least once a day?”
More or less. When one person is eating, someone else is usually in the house at the same time.

On a normal day, my life feels like something between a perpetual summer camp and a three-ring circus. You probably feel the same. Think about the average workweek in this country. It wasn’t that long ago we had futurists predicting that one of the main challenges for coming generations would be too much spare time. In 1967, for example, testimony before a Senate subcommittee claimed that by 1985 the average workweek would be just twenty-two hours. Instead, Americans lead the industrialized world in annual work hours. Our annual hours have increased from 1,716 for the average worker in 1967 to 1,878 hours in the year 2000. British workers put in an extra hour every day compared to the Germans and the Italians, but that’s still almost an hour less than Americans. If you want a little easier load (and a lot of oil-generated wealth), consider Norway. Workers there put in an average of 14 weeks fewer per year than their American counterparts.

A Busy New World

It’s perplexing when you think about it. Why should we—Americans, Westerners, almost anyone in the industrialized world—why should we, of all people, be so busy when we live in such luxury? Are we wimps? Are we bringing this

3 Ibid., 115.
5 Swenson, Margin, 115.
on ourselves? Are we especially poor at managing our lives? Maybe; it’s possible; perhaps. But there does seem to be something unique about our time.

At first it seems like life couldn’t possibly be more challenging in any way than, say, during the Reformation. A guy like John Calvin never had indoor plumbing. He didn’t have centralized heat or air conditioning. He had to write his books and letters by hand or dictate them to a scribe. He had no automobile to get around in. His life had almost none of the comforts we take for granted. He was sick all the time. He worked too much. He died at 54. People can be busy in any century.

But while people can drive themselves to exhaustion in any age, there’s no mistaking that sixteenth-century Geneva was a far simpler place than our world today. There are two realities of the modernized, urbanized, globalized world that most everyone else in human history could not fathom: our complexity and our opportunity. I could give you statistics about the terabytes of information on the Internet or the number of cereals at your grocery store to prove my point, but I don’t have to. No one has to convince you that this is what the world is like.

We have more opportunity than ever before. The ability to cheaply go anywhere is a recent development. The ability to get information from anywhere is, too. Even the ability to easily stay up past sundown is relatively new. The result, then, is simple but true: because we can do so much, we do do so much. Our lives have no limits. We eat (most of) what we want, buy (most of) what we want, and say yes to (too much of) what we want. In all of our lifetimes we’ve seen an exponential expan-
sion in the number of opportunities for children, opportunities for seniors, opportunities for leisure, opportunities for travel, opportunities for education, opportunities at church (and for different churches), opportunities in our local communities, and opportunities to make a difference around the world. No wonder we are so busy.

And alongside this explosion of opportunity in the modern world is a mind-boggling complexity. I went to Boston for seminary in 1999. Since my college was only twenty miles from where I grew up, seminary marked the first time I had been far away from home. The class work was challenging, but the real frustration that first year was figuring out how to be a grown-up. I planned out my reading and writing assignments meticulously, but no one told me to plan for all the exigencies of life. I had to figure out how to get my car fixed: where to take it, how to get there, and how to come up with $1,500 for a new transmission. I had to apply for financial aid. I had to navigate health insurance and car insurance. I had to open a new bank account. I had to do my own taxes. I had to get a phone set up and learn to pay my bills through a maze of automated instructions. I had to get a dial-up Internet connection. I had to do my own laundry, fold my own clothes, and iron my own shirts. And like so many young people, I had to do all of this without any family around or any close friends to show me the ropes. I had never known such bewilderment as in that first year, trying to become a functioning adult in our complicated  

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6*Yes, I know. This should have happened in college, but since I was so close to home I managed to get by for four years with doing almost no laundry.*
world. Everything took time—time I didn’t have, and time I didn’t plan for. What a bother. What a pain.

I even got called for jury duty.

Three Dangers to Avoid

As hectic and frustrating as modern life can be, the biggest dangers are not material or temporal inconveniences. A person can do physical labor twelve hours a day, six days a week for an entire life and not suffer many ill effects. In fact, he or she may be healthier for it. But if the strain is mental—as is the case for most jobs and for most of us—the negative impact on the body can be huge. So don’t ignore the physical danger of busyness. Just remember the most serious threats are spiritual. When we are crazy busy, we put our souls at risk. The challenge is not merely to make a few bad habits go away. The challenge is to not let our spiritual lives slip away. The dangers are serious, and they are growing. And few of us are as safe as we may think.

The first danger is that busyness can ruin our joy. This is the most immediate and obvious spiritual threat. As Christians, our lives should be marked by joy (Phil. 4:4), taste like joy (Gal. 5:22), and be filled with the fullness of joy (John 15:11). Busyness attacks all of that. One study found that commuters experience greater levels of stress than fighter pilots and riot police. That’s what we’re facing. When our lives are frantic and frenzied, we are more prone to anxiety, resentment, impatience, and irritability.

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7 Swenson, Margin, 46.
As I worked on this book, I could sense an improved spirit within me. Not because of my writing, but because of the time off I was granted to do the writing. During those weeks away from the pressures of travel, meetings, and constant sermon preparation, I found myself more patient with my kids, more thoughtful toward my wife, and more able to hear from God. Obviously, we all have weeks and months where everything that can go wrong does go wrong. In those seasons we will have to fight hard for joy in the midst of busyness. But few of us will fight right now for next week’s joy by tackling the unnecessary habits of busyness that make most weeks an unhappy hassle.

Years ago I listened to an interview with Richard Swenson, a Christian physician, about the concept of “margin.” There’s nothing uniquely Christian about the idea itself, but there is something very un-Christian about ignoring it. “Margin,” Swenson says, “is the space between our load and our limits.” Planning for margin means planning for the unplannable. It means we understand what’s possible for us as finite creatures and then we schedule for less than that.

Over the past year I’ve come to see that I plan no margin in my weeks—reverse margin, actually. I look at my week, and before any interruptions come or any new opportunities arise or any setbacks occur, I already have no idea how to get everything done. I see the meetings scheduled, the sermons to be prepared, the e-mails I need to write, the blogs I need to post, the projects I need to complete, the people I need to see, and I figure that if everything goes a little better than expected, it

9Ibid., 69.
can all be squeezed in. But of course, there are no ideal weeks, and so I end up with no margin to absorb the surprises. So I hunker down, get harried, and get busy. That’s all I can do in the moment because I didn’t plan better weeks before.

Busyness is like sin: kill it, or it will be killing you. Most of us fall into a predictable pattern. We start to get overwhelmed by one or two big projects. Then we feel crushed by the daily grind. Then we despair of ever feeling at peace again and swear that something has to change. Then two weeks later life is more bearable, and we forget about our oath until the cycle starts all over again. What we don’t realize is that all the while we’ve been a joyless wretch, snapping like a turtle and as personally engaging as a cat. When busyness goes after joy, it goes after everyone’s joy.

The second danger is that busyness can rob our hearts. The sower tossed his seed liberally. Some fell along the path, and the birds devoured it. Some fell on rocky ground and sprang up quickly, only to wither away in the first scorching heat. And some fell among thorns, which choked out its fragile life. There’s a definite progression in Jesus’s parable (Mark 4:1–20). In some hearts, the Word of God does nothing. Satan scoops it up as soon as it is sown. In other hearts, the Word grows at first and then fades just as fast. Persecutions and trials put the would-be Christian out of commission. But in the third category of unsuccessful soil the Word sinks in a little deeper. The plant sprouts up, almost to the point of producing fruit. It looks a lot like good soil. New life seems to be taking root. Everything is on track for the harvest. Until the thorns come.
John Calvin says the human heart is “a thick forest of thorns.”

Jesus names two in particular. The first he labels “the cares of the world” (Mark 4:19). Do you know why retreats and mission trips and summer camps and Christian conferences are almost always good for your spiritual growth? Because you have to clear your schedule to do them. You get away. You set aside your normal insanity for a weekend and find the space to think, pray, and worship.

For most of us, it isn’t heresy or rank apostasy that will derail our profession of faith. It’s all the worries of life. You’ve got car repairs. Then your water heater goes out. The kids need to see a doctor. You haven’t done your taxes yet. Your checkbook isn’t balanced. You’re behind on thank you notes. You promised your mother you’d come over and fix a faucet. You’re behind on wedding planning. Your boards are coming up. You have more applications to send out. Your dissertation is due. Your refrigerator is empty. Your lawn needs mowing. Your curtains don’t look right. Your washing machine keeps rattling. This is life for most of us, and it’s choking out spiritual life.

A second thorn is related to the first. Jesus says the work of the Word is swallowed up by the desire for other things. It’s not that possessions themselves are to blame. The problem is with everything we do to take care of them and everything we do to get more of them. Is it any wonder that the most stressed-out people on the planet live in the most affluent countries? Cottages, boats, campers, time-shares, investments, real estate, snowmobiles, new cars, new houses, new computers,

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new iStuff, new video games, new makeup, new DVDs, new downloads, new . . . —they all take time. We’ve heard countless sermons warning us about the dangers of money. But the real danger comes after you spend the money. Once you own it you need to keep it clean, keep it working, and keep up with the latest improvements. If the worries of life don’t swamp us, the upkeep will.

Jesus knows what he’s talking about. As much as we must pray against the Devil and pray for the persecuted church, in Jesus’s thinking the greater threat to the gospel is sheer exhaustion. Busyness kills more Christians than bullets. How many sermons are stripped of their power by lavish dinner preparations and professional football? How many moments of pain are wasted because we never sat still enough to learn from them? How many times of private and family worship have been crowded out by soccer and school projects? We need to guard our hearts. The seed of God’s Word won’t grow to fruitfulness without pruning for rest, quiet, and calm.

The third danger is that busyness can cover up the rot in our souls. The hectic pace of life can make us physically and spiritually sick. That’s not likely a surprise to you. What we may not recognize is that our crazy schedules are often signals that the sickness has already set in.

Since 2002 I’ve gotten together each fall with my friends from seminary. Nine of us met every week while we were at Gordon-Conwell, and when we graduated we made a commitment to see each other once a year. We eat a lot, laugh a lot, and watch a lot of football. We also talk about our joys and
Here, There, and Gone: Three Dangers to Avoid

struggles from the past twelve months. Over the years we’ve noticed familiar themes for each of us. One guy may typically struggle with discontentment, another with discouragement, another with direction, another with relational strains at work. We all have our besetting sins and predictable issues. Mine has been busyness. When it comes time for me to share, everyone expects to hear how I have too much to do and don’t know what to cut out of my life.

While it may sound unhealthy for grown men to wrestle with the same issues year after year, the healthy sign is that we’ve begun to take more responsibility for our struggles. We realize that if the same issues smack the same guys every year, then maybe the real issue is inside each of us. What does it say about me that I’m frequently overwhelmed? What do I need to learn about myself? What biblical promises am I not believing? What divine commands am I ignoring that I should obey? What self-imposed commands am I obeying that I should ignore? What’s going on in my soul, so that busyness comes out as my chief challenge every year?

The presence of extreme busyness in our lives may point to deeper problems—a pervasive people-pleasing, a restless ambition, a malaise of meaninglessness. “Busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness,” writes Tim Kreider in his viral article, “The ‘Busy’ Trap,” for the New York Times. “Obviously your life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day.”11 The greatest danger with

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busyness is that there may be greater dangers you never have time to consider.

Busyness does not mean you are a faithful or fruitful Christian. It only means you are busy, just like everyone else. And like everyone else, your joy, your heart, and your soul are in danger. We need the Word of God to set us free. We need biblical wisdom to set us straight. What we need is the Great Physician to heal our overscheduled souls.

If only we could make time for an appointment.