

Interruptions or Opportunities?

Maybe you're a task-oriented person with the capacity to concentrate intensely on a task and accomplish a great deal in a given amount of time. That can be a valuable strength because it enables you to be efficient and highly productive.

The downside of that personality trait is that it can cause you to miss opportunities for ministry. In my 38 years in full-time pastoral ministry many of those opportunities seemed to come in the form of interruptions to my plans, goals and objectives for the day or the half-day or the next hour.

I see myself as the kind of person I described in the opening paragraph; whether I am or not I leave to the judgment of others. Over the years I had difficulty dealing with all sorts of pesky people who seemed to show up right in the middle of my doing something important and significant. (Can you see the tongue in my cheek in that last sentence?)

I had to learn to do two things: First, I needed to re-engineer my mind to recognize opportunities in the interruptions. It helped to remember the saying, "If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans." I actually had to talk to myself sometimes: "Relax, Dick, this person needs to see you now, and it's OK to stop what you're working on. Get over your frustration and welcome this person that God is sending to you right now."

I came to realize that nearly every ministry event in Jesus' earthly ministry was an interruption of one sort or another. So many times it says in the Gospels that as Jesus was on His way to such and such a place, someone came up to Him and asked Him to do something. He was on His way somewhere, but He always stopped to focus on that person and address the genuine need of that individual.

The second thing I needed to learn was to get away from the office if I had to work right now on something important that required uninterrupted concentration. Notice the words "right now" . . . "important" . . . "uninterrupted." Those were my criteria for getting away. As long as I was in the office I was fair game for interruptions. So I would get away for a couple of hours (sometimes less, sometimes more) to work on that sermon, that Bible study, that presentation.

In my mind I sometimes related that practice to the way Jesus would get away from everyone to have quality time with His Father in heaven. The truth is that it was more about being realistic about my personality than it was about being like Jesus, but I'm pretty sure He understands.

Sometimes interruptions may be God's way of reminding us to be open to those people who come up to us as we're on our way somewhere, because those people are where the ministry is.

On the other hand, if you're a natural-born schmoozer whose favorite thing is hanging out with anybody and everybody, maybe it's time to stop gabbing and get back to work!

