

From Section 6: Living within God's Good Limits: **Making a Plan**

*"Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance." Psalm 16:5-6*

A Blueprint for Balance

Every Christian couple can look to God's Word for boundaries and for help to live out the story God has written for their lives, but for pastors and their wives, God actually wrote in a bit more to help them. And that's a very good thing, for without His help, my life as a pastor's wife feels like a boundary-less black-hole of needs to be met and desires to be fulfilled. I'll show you what I mean.

Here it goes:

- I'm a person, with my own set of wants and needs, with limited amount of energy.
- Married to a man who wants my help in meeting many of his own wants and needs.
- Parenting children who want even more of my help meeting many more of their own wants and needs.
- Surrounded by a church of other people wanting me to help them meet their own wants and needs.
- Surrounded by a world of other people needing to know Christ, as well as wanting me to help them meet their own wants and needs.

Wow! Was pretty overwhelming, doesn't it? It makes the familiar panic feeling rise in my heart, then comes the cry, "I CAN'T DO IT ALL!!!!"

And what is God's kind response to me when I start to get sucked down this black hole version of life? It is: "you are absolutely right, you can't do it all, because you are not God. I am. So stop trying! What I want you to focus on is living contentedly within the boundaries I give you, rather than auditioning for my job."

Now this may seem simple enough for me to get that I am not God and shouldn't act like I am. I'm certainly not thinking that you are having difficulty getting us confused! But honestly, when you hear or see a need, especially one that either no one is meeting or that you might be especially able to me, aren't you tempted to jump right in and take care of it... Even if your plate is full already? I am. And then comes the crash, not too long afterwards, when I'm in tears again because it has all become too much and I completely overwhelmed... And usually forced to back out of something.

And who suffers? Not just me, but my husband, my family, the other obligations I should be taken care of, and often the very person I hope to jump in and help. And let me tell you, I am not looking anything like content within the boundaries God is given me... For, of course, I've way overstepped them.

But there are so many needs! And perhaps as pastors' wives, we get to see even more of them than others, since we are so closely connected to our husbands and their ministry. That makes it all the more important to be careful in what we get involved in.

But fortunately, we don't have to live the boundary-less, black-hole life. We have God's truth and God,

Himself to give us wisdom. We have husbands to lead us as we seek a blueprint for balancing ministry and family well.

Blueprint for Balance

You have a lot of decisions to make to balance ministry and family life well. You will be weighing obligations, opportunities, needs and dreams. I wish our lives could fit them all in! But no, there's those boundaries of time, energy, and budget that we bump into over and over. Furthermore, no two ministry families have the same boundaries. You can learn from others, but you will have to custom build what's best for your family.

That's why, I'd like to share with you some tools that have helped us to build, (and re-build), as our family, seasons of life, and ministry have changed over the years.

1. Knit Your Hearts
2. Know Your Flow
3. Keep Coming Back

Let's take a look at each.

Knit Your Hearts: Marriage-Shaped Ministry

A Pastor Is:

A man who not only leads and loves his family well, but nourishes the church as a godly leader. He shepherds his congregation by teaching, correcting and guiding them according to God's Word. He provides an example for them, in his life and in his leadership at church and in his family. He knows himself to be a sinner saved by faith. He sets not a perfect example, but a good and godly example of what it means to live as one of God's people among God's people. To depend upon Christ's strength, to be transformed by the Spirit, and to keep heading towards that Day where we will all stand before the Lord. Through his preaching and through his example he helps prepare God's people for that day, too.

A Pastor's Wife Is:

The just woman who married the pastor. She's not a position. That means, like any other wife, she does well to let the Proverbs 31 "book-ends" shape her life:

Bookend #1: "She longs to do [her husband] good, not harm, all the days of her life (v.12).

Bookend #2: A woman who fears the LORD is to be praised (v.30).

But as a pastor's wife, longing to do her pastor-husband good cannot help but include supporting him in the ministry. She will be an indispensable part in helping him both NOURISH the local church with God's Word, and FLOURISH his family at the same time.

Marriage-shaped Ministry

Put this altogether and you get what Mark and I call "Marriage-shaped ministry. Marriage-shaped ministry is ministry in which our husbands nourish their local church, but within limits that provide the pastor and his wife/family with the time they need to flourish, as God as planned. Caring well for each other and our children and our family is not a second-class sideshow, to the work the Lord calls our husbands to do as pastors. It is part of the main "act". Actually, a man's promise to love his wife and their family takes precedence over pastoring. If something has to go, it's being a pastor. As my husband says, "The church can always get another pastor, but I'm always supposed to care well for you."

Start Out Together: An Ocean of Agreement

Boundaries mean limits. Limits mean decisions. There will no doubt be disagreements over where some of these limits fall. It can be easy to get up in each other's face and shake fingers at each other: "You want this... but I want that..." Most ministry couples have a few "great white sharks" of disappointment swimming in the pool of marriage and ministry. Instead of attacking one another, take a swim together in the "ocean of agreement." Remind each other of the many good things you already agree upon and desire to do.

The best and happiest decisions come from unity. Unity comes with minds and hearts knit together in understanding and purpose, grounded in God's Word. Too many times, we leave the things we agree upon unsaid and that allows the issues we disagree upon to grow bigger and our hearts to harden. This ocean helps put your difficulties into proper perspective. It helps you turn from being opponents to being comrades who work together to figure out how to shrink those great whites down to minnows.

Things you probably agree upon:

- You both long to see God glorified.
- You both long to see many come to faith.
- You both long to see God's people grow.
- You both know God has a plan for your life in ministry and He gives wisdom freely.
- You love your husband and want him to do well as a pastor.
- You want him to have time to prepare and preach God's Word well.
- You both want him to care well for the members of the church.
- Your husband loves you and wants to care well for you/your family
- Your husband does not want to neglect you or your family.
- Your husband does not want the ministry to be an unhealthy place for your family.
- Your husband appreciates you and the sacrifices you make to support him in the ministry.
- You both want to spend time together as a couple/family.
- You both want to encourage each other to grow closer to God.
- You both want to have friends.
- You both want to use your home as a place of hospitality.
- You know that this is a best guess plan and adjustments will be needed.
- You both know that he is new to this job and it may take time to get into a regular rhythm.
- You both know that sometimes the pastoral ministry involves emergency meetings.
- You know that you will both need to forgive each other when you fail to get the balance right.
- You both know that it will take God's help over and again to get the balance right.

These are some of the points of unity you might come up with. Thank God for these points of unity. Ask Him to help you to work as a team as you build a schedule.

Even if the points of unity seem obvious, take time to say them or write them down. Thank God for them and ask Him to guide you to love each other well and to make the best decisions for your family and your husband's job as pastor. God can use these to grow an attitude of comradery as you get into the nitty-gritty of your schedule.

Some of the most helpful words my husband has said to me are summarized here:

"God has made me your head to love you like Christ has loved the church. I want to love you that way. I will need help loving you that way, because you are very different from me. There are times when I will choose something for our family that doesn't immediately seem best to you, but I will not do

those lightly and I will only do that after listening to what you have to say, too. God has always meant for you to be part of his wisdom for me. And when we disagree, let's agree to pray about those things and even seek the counsel of others who we respect to help us see things more clearly and to know what God would have us do. I want to love the church well, but I want to love you well, too. I need your encouragement and your help to do both of these things."

Some of the most helpful words I've said to my husband are summarized here:

"God is made you to be my head and I want to support you and serve you and submit to you. I want to make your job a delight. I want to be an encouragement to you. I want to see you do well at this church. I want to be a part of helping you love our family well. Sometimes submission is hard and scary. But when you listen to my opinion and take it seriously into consideration on points where we at first disagree, that makes it a joy to submit to you. And when you are willing to seek the counsel of others on important points that we disagree upon, it makes me respect you even more."

Go with the Flow: Sketching Out Your Schedule

There is only one way to God, but there are lots of ways to sketch out a schedule. Some people will go into great detail, while others fly by the seat of their pants. The more moving parts in your life, the more detailed you will probably need, otherwise you will be miscommunicating, over-booking, or under-estimating ministry and family needs. As empty-nesters now, Mark and I come closer to flying by the seat of our pants. We know so many of our regular routines and there aren't all the kids' activities we used to navigate. But for much of our life together, we have needed a more detailed calendar of events to keep family and ministry in balance.

I'll leave it to you (or the school of hard knocks) to figure out how much detail you need. However, if you are new to the ministry or new to marriage, it would be especially useful if you get something like a big wall calendar that will show the whole year at once, but also give you room to write details under each day.

You can also print out separate months and paste them on a piece of poster board (or just lay them out on the table as you talk).

And grab yourself a pencil with a FULL ERASER, and let's get sketching!

1. Map Out Your Husband's Job at Church

If your church gives your husband a job description, this can be a great place to start. Some churches with larger staffs have particular office hours as well as regular meeting times (such as members' meetings and elders' meetings) that fall outside those office hours. Add in weekly services and any other regularly occurring job obligations. These can form a baseline for when you know your husband will regularly need to be at church.

Next, add in any other typical patterns to your husband's needs for personal devotions and prep time for sermons, Bible studies, etc. Can these needs be met during church office hours or will they require time outside of work? If any time outside of church hours is needed, are there times that he is obligated to do these or typically does these?

Church Office Hours

- Service Planning
- Staff Meetings
- Other Regular Meetings
- Preparation for Worship Services

After Hours Meetings

- Elders' Meetings
- Committee Meetings
- Lunches with Members
- Informal Conversations

Teaching God's Word

- Sermon Prep
- Bible Study Prep
- Sunday School Classes
- Weddings and Funerals

Guiding God's People

- Counselling
- Visitation
- Praying
- Hospitality
- Discipling
- Emergencies

Trips

- Convention Meeting
- Elders' Retreat
- Mission Trips
- Youth Group Retreats

2. Put in Your Family's Needs

Now, turn towards home. Be warned: family needs can be a bit harder to get a handle on. And, depending on "history" they can be explosive as to who does what. Stop and pray before you delve into this section. Ask God to help you both see what your family's needs and how to make the best balance with your husband's ministry. Remember: you are seeking to work together to help your husband manage and love his family best. Things to put in or at least talk about might include:

Survival

- Sleep
- Rest
- Exercise
- Food
- Special Health Needs

Spiritual Food

- Quiet Times
- Family Devotions

Fellowship

- Couple time at home
- Couple time date night/overnight away
- Couples time with other couples
- Ladies'/Men's Night Out
- Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays
- Family fun time
- Time with individual kids
- Family meals
- Visiting Relatives

Household Chores

Wife's Work (outside the home, if you do)

- Your work hours
- Your after-hour work obligations

Kids' Stuff

- Kids' activities
- Homeschool/School/ Carpool/Homework help
- Volunteer Hours (at their school, etc)
- Sports/Music practicing at home
- Meeting the kids' friends
- Bedtime Stories and Prayers
- Devotions/Catechism
- Caring for the Kids
- Discipline
- Church Services and Activities

Re-charge Time

- Regular Days Off
- Vacation
- Time with Friends
- Enjoy a hobby

Wife's Ministry

- Discipleship
- Children's Ministry
- Women's Ministry
- Outreach
- Music
- Counseling

Do Some Landscaping

Take a good look at what you've penciled in. What is missing? What would you like to spend more time doing? What patterns do you notice? How well does ministry and marriage fit together? Where are the rubs? Is there any way you can relieve some of them? How can you help each other? Use that eraser to make changes that mesh ministry and marriage together better.

Try not to get into a fight over this. Remember that communication is the first step towards unity. Don't forget all the things you agree about. If you start to get upset, try not to accuse the person of not caring just because they don't see something as the same priority as you. You aren't clones of each other. You are different. Respect each other and try to come to an agreement. If something is more important to your husband than you, try to accommodate that priority; just like you want him to do that with something you value as more important than him. And usually, it's not that you disagree on something's importance, but how much time should be spent on it.

You may be helped by bringing in some outside help if you are overwhelmed, confused, or just plain upset. You will be especially helped if you can find an older ministry couple or at least a couple who has more ministry experience. Everyone faces this balancing act. Might as well get some help from the wisdom of others.

It can be especially hard for men to ask for help. The same, very admirable quality of confident decision can also carry with it a blindness to see a need for help. You may need to be very winsome in asking him who he respects who could look over your schedule and talk to you about it. Do not do this in a degrading way! If nothing else, after any conversation with that outside couple, don't forget to encourage him for being the kind of man who seeks advice to make the best decision for his family and his ministry.

Start Your Engines!

You've worked together to build your best guess at a schedule that is nourishing to the church as well as flourishing to the family. Now it's time to try it out and see what works and what doesn't. And believe me, there will always be things that do not go as planned.

I don't know if you saw any of the Pirates of the Caribbean movies, but I find I still regularly quote a line from the first movie, released almost 20 years ago. Elizabeth Swann is captured by the pirates and tricked when bargaining with Captain Barbossa, the "head" pirate. and declares "parley" giving her the right to a fair bargain. Elizabeth cries "unfair" when Barbossa, the Captain pirate, tricks her and smirks, "The code is more what you'd call 'guidelines' than actual rules." I don't know about parley or pirates really, and I'm not encouraging you to trick your spouse. But, like Barbossa I want to emphasize: these suggestions are guidelines more or less. Take them or leave them, according to what is useful to you.

This calendar is NOT:

- Your new Bible.
- Based on crystal ball-like knowledge of the future.
- A guarantee for contentment.
- Proof that your husband/wife doesn't care if he/she doesn't follow through.
- Rationale for future lynching of your husband/your wife.
- The final word on your schedule.
- A blueprint for the rest of your lives.

This calendar IS:

- A snapshot of what your lives look like now (at least on the day you created it).
- A tool to help ministry and home life mesh well.
- Can help you support your husband and him to care well for you.
- Can help you love each other better.
- A great thing to pray over and ask for God's help.
- A source of encouragement for the things that are going well.
- A breadcrumb trail to show you where your time is being spent to help you become even better stewards of the lives God has given you.
- To help you glorify God through good stewardship of the people He's put in your life.
- Something to take seriously, but still can only be a guideline, more or less.

Keep Coming Back: Listen and Learn

Conversation Checkpoints

Once you have your calendar penciled in, there's a number of helpful checkpoints you might use to help you shape your schedule into something even better. Bring a gracious attitude to these meetings. Ask Him to use them to shed light on the path He wants your family to take. Ask Him to not only help you formulate a good plan forward, but to make the very process a chance to show each other love. Ask Him to protect hearts from selfishness and mouths from unkindness. Ask Him to help you have unity, and where there isn't immediate unity, appreciation and respect for the other's perspective. Thank Him for always being faithful to give wisdom when we ask Him for it.

Checkpoint #1: Weekly Check-ins at First

At first, you may do best with a weekly check-in time. Compare what you thought your week would look like with what it did look like. Discuss what happened. What was good about what happened? What didn't go as you would have liked or had planned? Was it because of one-time events you couldn't predict (such as everyone came down with the stomach flu), unrealistic scheduling, or some other reason. What do you know you should re-shape in your schedule now? What would be good to wait and see if it stays the norm?

Checkpoint #2: Monthly Check-ins

After a few weeks, you will begin to discern patterns of what happens and why. The one-month point gives you four weeks of "data" to make some good re-adjustments. Major on humility, patience, grace, and encouragement as you talk about the month. Let it be ok that there's a learning curve to this. Remember: the goal is to work together toward the common goal of loving your family well while loving the church well. You agree on this goal! Work as a team to get better!

Checkpoint #3: Annual Check-in

Book a babysitter for your kids, grab the previous year's calendar and go out. This is like a physical and a Thanksgiving celebration all in one. You review the past year and how the family-ministry balance is going. Praise God for what has gone well. Ask Him to help you re-adjust and do better with what needs to improve. Find reasons to encourage each other. Set goals for the next year.

Adding in More

There is nothing “one and done” about our lives! Just when you think you have everything accounted for in your schedule, new opportunities or needs arise. Here are some tips to help you with these add-ins.

Adding in More: My Invitations

Are you a “yes” addict--someone who loves to say “yes” to people? “Yes” addicts can quickly un-balance the family-ministry balance with their quick yeses. I should know.... I am one. Here's what we've learned over the years to keep from feeding my addiction:

When asked to do something or when I'm thinking about starting something new, I avoid all sorts of trouble if I remember to ask myself these two questions:

1. What affect will this new obligation have upon supporting my husband and the callings upon his life—at home or in church?
 2. Will this new thing help me be more content or less content within my support of him?
- If the answer is that it might be harmful or his callings, or it make make me discontent within my support of him, then I say “no, thank you” to this new thing, right then and there.
 - If the answer is, “I'm not sure. Can I get back to you? I better talk it over with my husband first.”
 - If the answer is, I think it would have little or even a good affect and is a short-term obligation, I very likely will say yes. But, if it is something that involves a longer term commitment or a one-time, big chunk of time, the answer is still, “I'm not sure, can I get back to you? I better talk it over with my husband first.”

Adding in More: The Kids' Invitations

Sometimes it's not my opportunities, but the children's opportunities that can cause a major un-balance in our lives. Perhaps your gifted swimmer gets invited to be part of an elite swim team that not only has nightly practices, but swim meets many weekends. These require you to take him to and from practice during dinner time on weekdays, not to mention transportation to and sitting through the day-long meets.

What does saying “yes” to this activity do to the balance of the rest of your family's as well as your husband's schedule? Yet, how difficult to say no to a once in a lifetime chance like this? This example may be on the more extreme side of a child's activity un-balancing the rest of your life, but it does happen, especially in the junior high/senior high years.

Other times, it's not any one child's activity, but the fact that all the children have different activities and you are trying to keep your head on straight, while getting everyone where they are supposed to go. Having regular schedule check-in's can help you assess when you need to pull back for the long-term good of the whole family.

When your children come to either you or your husband asking permission to participate in something, follow the same guidelines you use for your invitations: “Let me ask your father. We need to talk about this together.” Avoid, if at all possible, setting your husband up to be the “bad guy” who says no after you have already said yes. Been there, done that!

Adding in More: Your Husband's Invitations

My husband isn't a "yes" addict like me, but many great ministry opportunities come his way—everything from a last-minute pastor friend coming in town needing a place to sleep and a meal to share, to invitations to go to Australia to speak to pastors for a month. He, too, has learned to talk to me before saying yes to opportunities like these if they involve out of office time or my preparations at home, and certainly if they involve overnight travel.

A Committee for Clarity

The "yes" addict in me really has a hard time when it comes to my husband's gospel opportunities. Either because I'm so excited about an opportunity that Mark has; or, because I feel like I'm being a "gospel blocker" if I say a certain activity is too much to add in for me/the kids. On top of that, the church feels its responsibility to balance Mark's time at the church with other gospel opportunities around the world. If he were to take them all, neither our family or the church would see him as we should.

So, the elders/pastoral staff came up with a great idea: form a committee to review Mark's (and the other pastors') invitations to speak outside the church. They committee review all speaking engagement requests. They have a set of priorities that help them decide which opportunities they suggest Mark (or the other pastors) to take and which ones to decline. This set of priorities includes our family's needs, our church's needs, whether the request involves speaking to lots of pastors (right on target for Mark), whether Mark would be uniquely suited for the opportunity, and length of time he would be away. Many requests never make it past this committee. They help Mark love his family and our church well with their advice.

Making Final Decisions

However, a good number of requests are approved. Mark brings these to me along with his calendar to think about together. "So, what do you think?" he says as he reads me the description of the month long trip to Australia and shows me how it sits in the calendar. I ask him a few questions; see what comes before and after this trip; weigh in other things, such as my chronic health condition, and of course, the kids' needs (when they were at home).

Then the tug-of-war begins. Everything in me wants to say "yes" to the gospel opportunity... but my body is doing poorly. A month is such a long time. Shouldn't I always say yes? Isn't it not trusting the Lord if I say no? And so goes the battle. I feel like a hindrance to the gospel if I say no.

But the truth is, Mark doesn't need me to be a yes wife, just like he didn't need that committee to be a yes committee. I'm his helper. His support. I'm to help him know the weight this trip would put on the family. Is this too out of balance? This is marriage-shaped, family-shaped ministry. He needs my honesty to lead in the shape of love and good stewardship. Sometimes I say "yes." Sometimes I say "no." I always try give him my best assessment of what would be good for the family. This is what he needs from me to lead us well.

So there you go! Hopefully, you and your husband have come up with a basic plan to try out as you begin a lifelong journey of trying to flourish the family as you nourish the church.

If you are looking for more wisdom from the school of hard knocks, carry on to the next sections:

- **Advice from the School of Hard Knocks**
- **Limit Liars: Halving, Doubling Your Husband's Ministry and Other Measurements of Success**
- **Ministry Potluck: 10 Tips for Balancing Your Ministry and Family Life Inside the Church Doors**
- **Labor Lengths: Ways to Make More of Your Limited Time**
- **A Host of Ways to Be Hospitable**