

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*

Labor Lengtheners: Ways to Make More of Your Limited Time

1. Bringing Home the Bacon... and Doing the Dishes

Behind that household of relationships is a household of practical needs-- the bones of our household. Someone needs to buy the groceries and make the meals. Someone needs to wash the dishes and wash the close. Someone needs to fix the sink and mow the grass. Somebody needs to pay the bills and do the taxes. And if time were an infinite commodity, the decision as to who does what in your household could be made on aptitude alone. I'm good at this; my husband's good at that. Let's go through the list until everything is portioned out. Check. Household needs taking care of.

But of course, time is anything but finite. Sometimes the person who has the most aptitude isn't available. Other times, no one either wants to do a job or is any good at it. And is much as were told not to cry over spilled milk, I certainly know of couples who have cried and fought over who should clean it up. "I cleaned it up last time. It's your turn to clean up this time..." "You're gone all day at church, and you've got meetings back there again tonight. I am exhausted from being with kids and cleaning up after them all day. Could you at least clean up this milk for me?" etc.

Team Work

It's true. There are only 24 hours in a day and 7 days in each week. There's nothing we can do to lengthen our limits that way. But we can work smarter as husband and wife, as we tackle the practical chores of life. And that smart teamwork can maximize the time we have for more important family and ministry opportunities. Grab your football, shoulder pads and cleats. I feel some sports analogies coming.

Teams Have the Same Goal in Mind

How can we split up household chores without dividing our hearts? Thinking as a team helps a lot. Was the first question you ask when playing a game for the first time? Isn't it: "How do you win?" If it's football, your goal is touchdowns. If it's baseball, your goal is home runs. Same thing with your household team. You need to your goal so your team can work together towards a victory.

The goal of our household was this: Taking care of our household's "bones" (needs) in a way that gets everything done, doesn't strain anyone, and maximizes our time for what's most important: our household's "heart" (couple time, family time, personal time, and time for others in and outside of ministry). Just verbalizing this goal can be really helpful. No longer do you have to depend on the classic "50-50 split" of the workload or and "you do this because it's man's work and I'll do this because it's woman's work" decision model because that's what seems "fair." Your team has its goal and is looking to win. You can work together to split up your household's needs however is most effective to get there.

Set up Your Playbook

Now that you have come up with your goal, you have to set up how you are going to get there play-by-play. This means thinking through what your household's needs are and figure out who's best to do them, given your goal.

For instance, my husband is great with dishes, but he's super slow (he would say he's super thorough, and he might have a point there). I can do dishes lightning fast. Usually, we choose for me to do dishes because we would rather get through the dishes more rapidly and have time for a nice long walk before he has to go to an evening meeting.

On the other hand, my husband is out most days for lunch. He frequently takes a grocery list along and picks up whatever I need on his way back from his lunch. Or, if there's some other errand I need running that he could do, he grabs one of the guys he's discipling and they go together and do my errand and get a good chance to talk, too. Not only does that free up my day to do other things I need to do and saves my bad back from carrying the groceries, but it even lessens his after-work ministry time. That gives us more time together as a family.

When our kids were little, Mark put a reminder on his schedule to come down and play with the kids, or help me in some other way, while I was working on dinner. It made my dinner prep easier (bones) and it also took us towards one of our goals: time for him with the kids.

These are a few plays from our playbook that have helped our team work well to get to our goal. The plays in your playbook will be as custom as your family and the needs of your household.

Add in New Plays

One of the hardest things about goal setting has to do with that phrase "what needs to be done." Differences in preference or degree of acceptable housekeeping are frequently what makes this so difficult. Some husbands or wives prefer a spotless house. Others might not mind a mess here or there. They care far more that the bills are being paid on time or that there's clean underwear to put on in the morning. No two people are alike so if you can come to joint agreement of tolerability with household chores you've accomplished a lot.

Throw in a change of life like a new baby and the level of housekeeping tolerability your playbook is based upon will probably need to change yet again. Your goal of caring well for a sleep deprived mother is more important than doing the dirty dishes in your sink. The same is true for your husband. Perhaps he usually does the bills, but there's been a particularly big issue boiling over at church that's kept him away from home more than usual. You two choose for him to play with the kids when he gets home and you find time to pay the bills while he's away that his meeting. Housekeeping preferences give way to loving relationships by mutual agreement.

Sign a Free-Agent If You Can

Free agents are outside players you add to your team to make it stronger. One of my favorite free-agents I've enjoyed over the last few years is someone to help with the cleaning of our very large Capitol Hill rowhouse. Not only does this save me time so that our house is ready for the almost constant onslaught of visitors and church members coming through our house, but it saves my bad back from going out yet. If there's one thing "our team" has learned, it's vital that THIS member does not go on the injured list if at all possible. I hate writing the check to the cleaning ladies! As I'm filling out the amount, I'm thinking all the other ways I'd rather spend that money. But their work saves my back. And if the goal of our team is to have good couple time, good family time, good friend time, and even good personal time as well as be better available for whatever we do at church, this is a good play for our team.

Cleaning service may be a luxury your budget doesn't allow, but perhaps you have a young, married or single girlfriend who would love to have time with you. Invite her over to clean alongside of you or do some other chore that you need to do. Not only will this multiply what you get done, but it is great for your friendship.

I have another friend who loves to garden but has very little gardening space at her house. She comes over, weeds my garden so I don't hurt my back, and we have a great time talking. I think my husband is the master of free agents. He's always in listing one young guy or the other to come over and help him do whatever chores or errands we need done.

Call a Timeout

When teams face an important opportunity or the game just seems to be getting away from them, they will often call a timeout. This allows them to rethink their strategy to turn the game around and come out with a win. Chances are the first set of plans you and your husband make to get all your household chores done so that you can spend better time together as a family, will not be your last set of plans. Life is constantly changing and with it will come in need to reassess your strategies. Some couples can get away with sporadic, informal conversations about how effective they are at meeting these goals. Others do better by setting regular times to reassess.

If you can talk about these things without getting upset with each other, or if you don't feel bad asking for more help, you may do just fine with informal conversations. As for myself, I have a tendency to feel bad at asking Mark to add something else to his already busy plate. Setting regular times to tell him my needs makes it much easier for me to ask him for his help. Or, you might not have any trouble sharing with each other, your tendency might just be that life gets so busy that things get overwhelming and you wind up arguing about things that could have been dealt with calmly had you scheduled a regular talking time.

Be on Alert for an Interception

While Mark and I, probably like most couples, have found a fairly workable division of labor, we try not to treat our chore lists like a contract between the labor union and management. Instead, love and helpfulness is the tone. Perhaps there's something Mark usually does, but I know he's having an especially busy week and doesn't have time to do it. I look for a way to "intercept" that household chore, so he doesn't have to do it. That helps us get to our goal of making better use of the time he does have. I'm not talking about a pattern of laziness or procrastination. I'm not talking about forgetfulness either. You may need to figure out how to kindly prompt each other to do chores that are frequently forgotten. These are all issues you'll have to talk through.

Celebrate a Good Play

And Just because someone is supposed to do a chore doesn't mean we forget to say thank you. Most people would rather not do household chores. We have much to appreciate how chore tending helps our whole family. Show your gratitude to each other for what you do!

Cross-Training

Some pastors' families have only to think about juggling household chores between a husband who is working as a pastor and a wife who is staying home with kids. That can be complicated enough. In other families, the wife is working outside of the home as well as her pastor-husband. And most difficult of all, is when the husband is a seminary student who also works, or a bi-vocational pastor who leads a church as well as having another job on the side to pay the bills. This makes it even harder to figure out how to get all the household chores done and find enough time for quality together time.

These situations take even more deliberate planning since there is less margin for both household chores and for family time. It will be very important to regularly assess how the family is doing on both accounts and reevaluate regularly. It will take grace and time to learn how to best juggle everything.

But if even with grace and time, your household needs and especially your together time are not being well tended to, then you need to have a conversation about how sustainable your life is like this. If the wife is working in order to make ends meet, her pastor-husband may need to share the strain on the family caused by their budget shortfall. It could be the church is unaware of the need and can help.

If the husband is a working seminary student, they may want to seek out extra support from friends or families or the church that sent them out. Because so many seminary students have families and feel the strain, there can develop the attitude that we just have to get through this without looking carefully at the cost upon your family.

It may slow things down, but taking less classes can provide the extra time that families need to survive. Mark plan to get through seminary in three years, but the schedule was too hard on our family. We decided to take an extra year and it made such a big difference.

If the husband is bi-vocational, the church very likely does not have additional money to give his family. Their only source of financial help might be outside fundraising and support from a sponsoring sister church. Many find the strain of bi-vocational ministry to be so great that by the three-year point, they face a crisis in their ministry, their health, or their family. This is a short-term ministry model, not a long-term one.

Good PR (pastoral reminders) for the Sports Fans

If you have children, marriage and ministry means you have a set of watching eyes most of the time. How you care for each other whether it's through doing household chores or making a priority of together time, sets a huge example for your children. It shows them that your marriage and your family are not in competition with God just because you are in the pastoral ministry. It shows them that because you love God and He loves you, your marriage, and your family, there will be a pattern of deliberate time you spend together. This deliberateness can have a huge impact on what they think of the church. It certainly did on our children. Go team!