

Relief from the Pressure to Produce

by Roy Yanke



By Roy A. Yanke – Executive Director, PIR Ministries

Are we called to “produce”?

I know you feel it. I know you feel it because I feel it too. The incessant pressure to be productive; and not just humanly, but super-humanly. It is insidious and relentless, fed by a culture that puts a premium on measuring outputs as an indication of success. *Be More* and *Do More* are the twin pillars of this culture. Pastors and churches are not immune. The seductive hum of the need to measure our effectiveness and our worth can be felt behind the pastor’s desk, in the church board room and in the seats of our places of worship.

What if it could be different? What if it *should* be different?

A recent interchange in one of the pastors’ groups I am a part of got me thinking about this important issue again. It’s an issue I definitely resonate with, and the discussion revealed that this is a shared experience. I would like to explore this with you; with the hope of helping us all relieve the pressure to produce.

The first question we need to answer is, “Are we called to produce?”

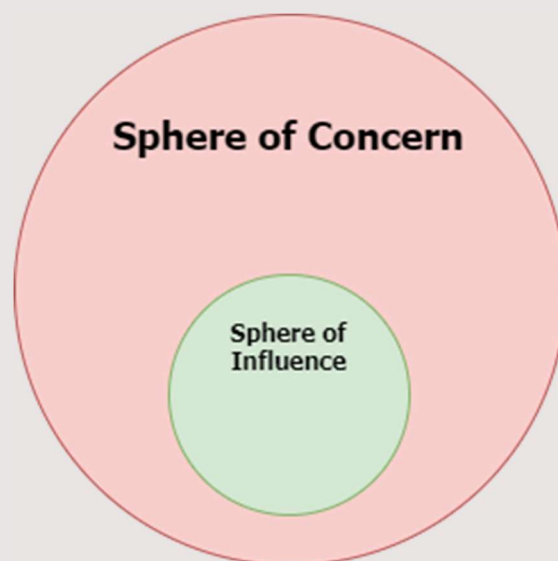
My first response to that question is, “Of course! Didn’t Jesus say we are to bear fruit? That’s productivity, right?” Actually, on closer inspection, notice that Jesus didn’t call us to produce. He called us to abide – in Him (John 15). Have you noticed that everything about results, productivity and outputs in Scripture is expressed in very organic terms? Consider the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13), or the Parable of the Seed (Mark 4). Throughout the New Testament our calling to serve, the invitation to participate in the work of God, flows from a living relationship with Jesus through His Holy Spirit.



I wonder if we too often see ourselves as employees whose only value is how much and how fast we can produce results rather than friends and partners in a dynamic and intimate enterprise.

I think that one of the subtle effects of Jesus' ministry was to build a truly counter- “productive” culture. His way of life, his interactions with people and his teaching communicated that identity and worth are *not* measured by doing. Success, according to Jesus, is the outcome of *character*, not effort. The Parable of the Talents – which comes the closest in any of Jesus' teaching to the idea of “productivity” – is really about *faithfulness* – faithfulness with who we are and what we have been given. Each servant is assigned his or her responsibility. The measure is “Well done, good and *faithful* servant!”

The idea of different amounts distributed to each person reminds me of a concept I learned (and am still learning) about spheres of influence. It comes from Stephen Covey, and it is represented by a circle within a circle.



The larger circle is my “sphere of concern” – all those things in my work and life that I should give time and attention to – my exhaustive (and exhausting) to do list. It lures me with the siren song of “If I just worked harder, scheduled better, spread myself thinner, I could do more!” The smaller, inner circle is the “sphere of influence” – the places, people and things that I can actually do something about. In fact, they may be the very (only?) things I am called to do something about. Perhaps they are the number of talents I have been given?

The bottom line is we have been called to live in organic connection with Jesus and to be faithful with the sphere of influence He has assigned to us.

Can we actually live like this? I think so. What do you think?

Here is an interesting exercise to begin with. Take a few minutes, think about your sphere of influence, and write down the things that belong there. It might be very revealing.

The Root of the Problem

“It turns out that what you really think about Jesus is revealed by what you do after you find out that you don’t have to do anything” – Dallas Willard

We answered the question of whether or not we are called to *produce*. The conclusion? Abiding in Christ and faithfulness in our sphere of influence are our callings, which can help relieve much of the pressure we feel. But this is only step one.

Step two is determining where the pressure to produce comes from. There is truly only one source.

The root of the problem?



I call it the “push.” The push to *do* more so that I can *be* more. In order to sense that I am making a difference and that I have significance I need to write *more*, post *more*, be everywhere *more*, see *more* results. I validate my calling and even my very existence by my productivity. Let me be clear – doing good work, discerning how to be effective, learning to be a bit more efficient – all of these are good things. But when they spiral out of control it usually is the result of trying to squeeze my identity and sense of calling out of things that were never meant to provide them. Like the old English Proverb of trying to get “blood out of a stone”, we cannot extract what isn’t there to begin with.

Some may say, “Well, really, the pressure I feel comes from all of the expectations other people have of me!”– both legitimate and unrealistic. I am convinced that any external pressure I feel from others is usually the result of their internal pressure projected on me. For example, the oft expressed concern about how many people are attending our services is most likely the result of fear and someone’s own sense of needing to see results. However, like temptation that blossoms into sin, it often finds something to connect with in us. We give it permission, and the pressure builds.

This is nothing new. To be a fallen human being means to carry with us the button that Satan so easily pushed in the heart of our first parents. “You can be *more...*” was the bait; and we took it. Jesus faced the same fishing expedition on the part of the evil one when He was tempted in the wilderness. The effort to get Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple was the “push” – do more than follow the Father’s plan of simplicity and daily investment in a rag tag bunch of fishermen. Get the agenda going! Make your mark! Validate who you are!

I hold out hope for myself because Jesus, as the Second Adam – my representative – refused!

Discovering and holding on to our sense of identity and calling is no easy feat. If we want to work hard, this is one area that will demand it. But, as always, it begins with the work of God’s grace in our hearts. It begins with the simple but sublime prayer, “Change my heart, O God. Make it ever new!” From there, here are some suggested steps that I have found helpful:

Do a thorough examination of the inner motivations of your heart. *Why* am I pushed to do more? Take that question at least 5 levels deep before you quit.

Meditate regularly on Scriptures that help you see that the outcome truly belong to God. Here are a few to begin with: Psalm 1; Matthew 13:1-8, Mark 4: 26-29; 1 Corinthians 3: 1-14.

Daily ask the Holy Spirit to remind you that Jesus loves YOU more than what you will ever do FOR Him. Never forget that Jesus died for you, and not your ministry. Let the Gospel wash over you daily.

Create the rhythm of Sabbath rest. This weekly rhythm is probably one of the surest ways to untether ourselves from the idea that productivity defines us, as we rest in the grace and love of the Father.

Pick some companions who will remind you who you are, who Jesus is, and who ask you “Are you pushing?”

Refuse celebrity, like Jesus! 90% of Jesus earthly life was spent in the obscurity of the ordinary, and the other 10% was only briefly noteworthy from the world's perspective. Yet He could say that He had accomplished all that the Father gave Him to do at the end.

As you begin to change in *your* understanding, the final question becomes “How do we change the metrics of success in our churches?”

Changing the Metrics

“Stop counting what matters little and start counting what matters most – and help your church to know the difference.” – Bob Hyatt in Ministry Mantras.



I am sure you have heard this great conversation starter before; usually at a conference where other pastors were gathered... “So, how big is your church?”

Let's change the metrics!

As you change in your understanding of what success looks like, the question to ask is “*How* do we change the metrics of success in our churches?” The current defaults are deeply engrained and have flowed over into the church from the world of business.

In his chapter titled “Count what Matters,” Bob Hyatt describes the challenge that most of us in church ministry face – staying focused on the main thing.

After recognizing that he and his leaders were measuring the usual, but wrong, things he arrived at this conclusion. *“I’ve made a concerted effort in my heart and mind to care about the biggest question of all: “How are we doing at making disciples?” After all, when Jesus left us, he didn’t say, ‘Draw a big crowd.’ He said, ‘Make disciples.’”*

The outcomes are in God’s hands as the owner and vinedresser. (John 15:1)

What we need to do is stay faithful to the main thing and change the metrics of what success in ministry looks like.

Building a counter “productive” culture in our churches is no easy task, given the forces aligned against the effort. The internal pressures join with the external expectations to create a formidable foe. But if we could dream for a moment, what would that kind of culture look like in a church? How would we measure what matters?

We might make “statements of faith” like “In the field God has given us, what is the influence we hope for?” rather than hard goals and objectives that stand over us like angry sentries.

We might start asking questions like, “What is the evidence that people are connected to and growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ?” More Bible studies? More giving? More attendance? Instead of counting numbers and noses and the size of our programs, we might start celebrating engagement, reach, service and lifestyles conforming to the image of Jesus. In my 51st year of following Jesus, I am more deeply challenged than ever that “...teaching them (disciples) to obey (do, practice) all that I (Jesus) have commanded you...” (Mt. 28:20) is the lost key to real growth and the one thing we fail to do and to measure. Not making pharisaical checklists, but simply by mentoring, paying attention and affirming.

We might spend more time challenging each other as leaders to live lives of non-anxious, un-hurried faith and centeredness in Jesus, rather than stressing about and pushing to produce.

How do we begin leading our leaders and our people in changing the default metrics that define success in ministry?

Scour the Scriptures – Teach, discuss and explore what God’s metrics truly are.

Intentionally embrace them –Commit to them and hold each other accountable.

Pray for courage to stay with them – It will take a lot of courage to face the pushback. Pray and give each other grace when the pressure builds to revert back to the usual ways.

Talk about them often – this can't be a “one and done” approach. God encourages His people to remind each other through sacrament and “standing stones.” Following that model, *plan* to remember and renew your commitment to measuring what matters.

What would a counter “productive” culture look like in your church? I would like to know.

My prayer is that you will be relieved of the pressure to produce and find, instead, the joy of being that tree planted by the stream which bears its fruit in its season. (Ps.1:3)

(Posted originally at <https://pirministries.org/blog/>)

God's servants need hope! Roy's personal experience has shaped him in unique ways to come alongside the many pastors and their families who are "exited," have fallen or are just plain burned out in ministry. He pastored for 17 years in an evangelical denomination. As a result of a major "crash and burn," Roy experienced both the discipline and the grace of God through years of slow but steady growth, restoration and renewed hope. Roy currently serves as the Executive Director of PIR Ministries.

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