

# TAMING THE TO-DO LIST

*How to Choose Your  
Best Work Every Day*

Glynnis Whitwer



a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Glynnis Whitwer, Taming the To-Do List  
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*To Tod, my husband and best friend.  
Thank you for always believing in me,  
and always supporting God's call on my life.  
I love you.*



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## *Introduction*

Looking back, it's obvious procrastination has been a lifelong companion of mine.

It's always been easy to find other things to blame. But digging down deep unearths the truth—I put things off that I really should do. And in doing so, my to-do list gets out of control.

My procrastination first showed up in school, when I'd wait until the last minute to finish an assignment. Just good enough to make the grade . . . but never feeling like I'd done my best.

It then showed up at my first job, when I faced hard, challenging work that quite honestly made me wonder what I'd learned in four years of college. It was easier to plead busyness than to admit I felt underqualified and afraid to try. Would my work show I didn't have what it took?

Procrastination then popped up its bossy head as I got involved in church, volunteering, and leading small groups and Bible studies. But its influence truly escalated when I answered God's call to write and speak. It hasn't controlled all areas of my life, but it's impacted me enough that I finally said no. No to the lies that

tomorrow would be easier. No to the fear that I'd look like a fool. No to the threat that my best wasn't good enough.

And I also finally said yes. Yes to addressing the underlying issues of my procrastination. Yes to being brave enough to face some weak areas. Yes to hard choices that bring my responsibilities under control. And yes to sharing it all with you.

Here's what you won't find in this book: advice written from someone who has only studied this topic in a classroom or laboratory. Or advice from someone standing on the sidelines with a megaphone yelling instructions. You won't find any advice like "Just do something" or "Get over yourself!"

Rather, what I hope and pray you'll find is encouragement from someone who knows all the doubts, frustration, and personal disappointment procrastination causes because she has lived it. But you'll also find hope, encouragement, and truth that procrastination doesn't define you. Plus I've included practical tools that have helped me, and others, face the reasons we delay addressing our highest and best work.

We're on even ground, you and me. And we're both standing in the shadow of the cross of Jesus, where there's much-needed grace to be found.

Thank you for joining me here.

In His love,

Glynnis

# 1

## *Procrastinate? Me?*

God has promised forgiveness to your repentance; but he has not promised tomorrow to your procrastination.

St. Augustine

*Is it possible that I'm a procrastinator?* When this idea worked its way into my mind, I scoffed. After all, I was one of the busiest people I knew. Between work, home, kids, church, and my husband, my days were full to overflowing. I was always doing something for someone. I might put things off, but it was only because there was so much on my plate. *Right?*

I preferred to think of myself as a highly productive person. Have you ever heard the old adage that if you want something done, give it to the busiest person you know? Yep. That would be me.

Routinely I'd hear from a friend, "How do you manage all you do?" I usually responded with a humble brag such as, "Oh, I guess I'm just wired that way."

And my heart would do a little pitter-patter at this recognition of my work, at their respect of my achievements. I hungered for that type of response, and it fueled me to keep pressing on.

But in the quiet of my day, my to-do list whispered another truth. I knew this truth but I preferred to avoid it. It was easier to find excuses and place blame—because, after all, I was really busy.

You see, there's another side my friends don't see. They have the advantage of seeing all I get done; they don't see what's left undone.

But *I* do.

And it gnaws at my conscience. All. The. Time.

Perhaps you know this feeling too. No matter how much you do, what bothers you most is what you didn't do. That long list of to-dos (whether written down or just rolling around in your mind) keeps you up at night. It motivates you to download more productivity apps. You read every article on time management you can find.

And still you struggle to get things done. To manage all you have to do. And your list keeps growing. A lot of these tasks are mundane, everyday tasks. Things like cleaning the shower, making a menu for the week, and paying bills.

But there's more than just the required and necessary undone tasks that bother you. There are the dreams you cannot touch. The vacations you don't plan. The time you know you should spend with your parents, your children, your friends.

The “shoulds” of life trail us, tapping on our shoulders, saying, *Don't forget about me.*

Really? How could we? Those things we know we *should* do are never far away. It's hard to relax. Even when we try to take a break and enjoy some downtime, our minds don't stop. And then guilt sneaks in and joins the pressure party. It's an exhausting way to live. I know.

A few years ago I thought I was having a panic attack. I sat on my couch feeling as if I had a heavy weight on my chest. It was

hard to breathe and anxiety simmered, but there was no apparent threat. However, there were looming deadlines, a demanding home business, part-time telecommuting work, mounting emails, and five kids wondering when dinner would be ready and if there were any clean socks.

The problem wasn't what I was doing. It was everything I couldn't get done.

### **The Surface Problem**

My life felt out of control. I was burned out from having too much to do and always feeling behind. The fear of disappointing someone chased me constantly. I was busy, but didn't know what else to do.

Turns out I didn't have an anxiety problem. I had an overcommitment problem.

After that day, I became like a detective. Was I really losing it, or had something else happened? I used to be able to manage my life, what had changed?

My personal study led me to some significant findings that helped me address a part of my problem. Life was changing around me, but I kept trying to manage the new world with old tools. And with today's fast pace, "old" can be just a few years.

The biggest change in society I identified was a shift in responsibility. The burden of communication had shifted from the sender to the receiver. You see, when I grew up, we didn't have email, or even answering machines. So the burden to get a message to me was on you. Now, people can reach me any time, any place. And the burden is on me to respond.

This shift has affected all of us. Here's what happened for me: rather than being proactive about my life I spent my days being reactive. Rather than being the manager of my life I was the minion, at the beck and call of others.

Not only was I shortchanging myself and my family with that approach but I also wasn't honoring and obeying God fully.

It took me time to understand what was happening and implement changes, but these changes made a huge difference in my life. Reordering my priorities and learning new ways to manage my workload brought a sense of peace I hadn't felt in years. This is definitely still an ongoing battle, but there is hope. As we go through this book, I'll share some of my choices with you.

But even though I made many smart changes in my life, I discovered my overcommitment issue had another layer underneath. There was another beast to face head-on. Its name was *procrastination*.

## The Deeper Problem

Procrastination has always been a silent companion of mine, one that I knew was there but, as I said earlier, I preferred to ignore. My husband and I used to laugh and say if it wasn't for the last minute, nothing would get done. I didn't really think it was a problem. *Everyone procrastinates on something*, I reasoned. *Plus, what more can I do?* The problem certainly wasn't with me.

On the surface, there were always reasons why I couldn't get everything done. Good, solid reasons. It was just that I'd taken on too much work. Or my family needs were too demanding. And the technology that should have made my life easier actually made it harder sometimes. Who couldn't understand that?

Then, faced with a deadline, I would stress out, snap at everyone, stay up late, and rush to finish what needed to be done. Consequently, everything suffered. My family paid the price, my work was subpar, and I became a person I didn't like very much.

The issues affecting me were all legitimate. But there was *still* another issue afoot. One that took some soul-searching to identify. It was an internal desire for ease rather than challenge.

## Could It Go Deeper?

You see, faced with a choice between two tasks, my tendency was to choose whichever seemed easier at the moment. I desired an immediate benefit over a future blessing.

This truth about myself hit hard when I read Proverbs 13:4: “The appetite of the lazy craves, and gets nothing, while the appetite of the diligent is richly supplied” (NRSV).

I was actually using the verse to write a devotion about the importance of hard work when God made me sit for a while on the first half of it. I wasn’t very happy with God’s hint that I might need to consider laziness an issue. But the reality was my procrastination often indicated a hunger for something.

Sometimes it was comfort, such as when I chose to do something I knew how to do rather than pushing myself to learn something new. Other times it was safety, such as when I preferred to not deal with a hard or scary possibility. Or maybe I was hungering for the applause of others when they saw how much I got done.

There was a deeper issue brewing that needed my attention. But here’s the bottom line, then and now: when my choices are fueled by self-focused need, my best work is seldom done.

The truth is, there’s not much I won’t put off until tomorrow in exchange for an easier task today. I’m always busy, so on the surface it looks like I’m accomplishing a lot. But I have to ask myself: *Is the work I do today my best work? Is it the most crucial work? Is it what will make the most positive and lasting impact on my life? On my family’s lives? On my career? On my ministry?*

Of course, there are always unpleasant tasks that are easy to procrastinate. Organizing for taxes. Deep cleaning the house. Going to the doctor’s office. Those I put off as long as possible.

But I found I was also procrastinating on good things. On creative things. On dreams that would make my heart sing.

## Some Reasons for My Procrastination

Here's an example of what I mean. As the director of communications at my work, I had an opportunity to create and teach classes. This was something I loved to do. It's my sweet spot. And I would make money doing it. Great reasons to jump in with both feet. Right?

But it also meant I would have to shift gears mentally in my day. I'd have to set aside other work to focus on this. I'd have to be creative. To research. To plan. To design.

I would also have to have a slide presentation, which meant I'd have to learn Keynote, and I always forgot how to make the bullets fly in and out. I couldn't even remember what they called that function, so I couldn't even research it. The one slide presentation I did was with help, and I was so excited about how creative the flames burning up my title were, and I loved the sparkly bullet points. Then someone told me people didn't like fancy slideshows.

Great! Now I would have to learn how to prepare an effective slideshow. Without flames and sparkles.

Then once I had that done, I'd have to figure out the webinar software. And I KNEW there would be a technical glitch. The first time I tried by myself, there was no audio for the entire presentation. On my second attempt there was audio, but no video. Wonderful.

And for the record, just hitting random buttons on the keyboard doesn't help.

So back to that teaching opportunity. I knew I would get frustrated and impatient, and my emails would build up while I worked on it. Then someone would wonder why I hadn't responded to their email and send me another, albeit nice, follow-up email to crowd my inbox.

Just thinking about what it would take to create a class made me not even want to start!

It's much easier to try to get rid of some emails. Or bake cookies. That won't stress me out and there's a sweet reward at the end.

Sometimes I procrastinated because I didn't know the details, and the fear of the unknown kept me from moving forward. This happened when I learned about major dental work needed by one of my children.

The dentist asked me into her office, while holding a set of X rays. My son reclined in the chair, a plastic bib covering his chest and an apologetic grin on his face. The dentist flipped a switch on the wall, put the X rays up to a light box, and pointed out the crowded conditions in my son's mouth.

"Mrs. Whitwer, your son needs to have his wisdom teeth removed or he's going to have problems later."

"I understand," I replied, not really seeing what she saw but unwilling to question her professional opinion. I folded the referral, tucked it into my purse, and left with the intent to make calls the next day to get an estimate of the cost, find out our insurance coverage, and set an appointment.

But I didn't.

Truthfully, I was a bit annoyed and thought the dentist was slightly overreacting. I didn't get my wisdom teeth pulled as a child. Even though she referred us to a specialist, my suspicious nature was on alert. *Would she get a referral fee?*

I also dreaded the cost. Our finances were tight, and even with dental insurance the co-pay would certainly be more than we could afford. I didn't even want to know.

In the next year, two more dentists held two more sets of X rays and told me the same diagnosis for two more children. The dentist explained the crowded conditions in one mouth and the wrong angle in the other.

By the time they handed me the third referral to a specialist, I was ready to get some pliers, watch a YouTube video, and take care of those teeth myself.

Maybe some mothers would have rushed right out and called the specialist after the first recommendation.

Some mothers might have put off the call for a few days. Some for a few weeks. Maybe even some would have delayed a few months.

Call me an overachiever, but I'm going on several years at this point.



So, where does this leave me? Ready to deal with this issue of procrastination once and for all. To uncover the reasons beneath my tendency to put hard things off. To discover why I delay progress on the highest and best callings on my life.

Without addressing the issue of procrastination, my days can be filled with busy work but not my best work.

Busy work is the thief of our best work. It's answering emails rather than starting to write that novel. It's replying to texts rather than filling out the adoption paperwork. It's arranging meetings rather than drawing up the plans for an innovative project at work.

It's not always the big projects we delay. Sometimes my best work is caring for my home and family. I can go on Pinterest for menu ideas, but the fashion pins are so cute and forty-five minutes later I still don't have a plan for dinner. There's always something easier to do than clean the house, fold laundry, make doctor's appointments, organize paper piles, and so on.

We have things upside down! The things that matter least replace the things that matter most in our schedules. The work that would make the greatest impact on our lives gets put at the bottom of our to-do lists and transferred from one list to another—so many times they eventually fall off.

Sometimes it's near impossible to figure out what is our best work. It sounds so easy to say, "Identify your priorities and do those first." However, when we have so many demands on our

time, requests for our attention, and needs we must meet, we can feel helpless. We can feel like we don't know what to do next.

Feelings of helplessness make us want to escape, avoid, numb. It's right here where we make the choice to put off the very thing that would make the most impact.

When those feelings start to overtake me, it's time for me to press pause rather than make a self-defeating choice. Sometimes, the best thing to do is nothing . . . except seek direction from the One who always knows what our best is.

It's hard to differentiate between good, better, and best. There are so many options, choices, and demands. If left to my own instincts, when I'm feeling overwhelmed I can run in circles. Much like going to the grocery store, spending a hundred dollars, and leaving with nothing for dinner.

This is when we desperately need wisdom beyond what we can muster to make the best choices for ourselves, our families, our ministries, and our companies. Knowledge gives us facts, but wisdom gives us truth that makes a difference.

To find wisdom, I need to silence the demands of many to hear the commands of One. God is faithful, and His Word promises we can receive wisdom. In fact, it's a gift from God. Here is what James 1:5–6 says:

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

Verse 6 holds the key to receiving wisdom: don't doubt. When we ask God for direction, we must trust that He will speak to us. When I second-guess God, I get into trouble. We'll explore this idea more in a later chapter, but for now, know there is help.

Procrastination is a dangerous habit to develop, and it carries a high cost not only to our schedules but also to our hearts, spiritual

lives, relationships, and finances. There's a snowball effect of delayed tasks. And as they accumulate, we are further from the life we want and from the person we want to be. We even procrastinate when God gives us an assignment, and then we walk in disobedience. Which creates entirely new issues.

### The Promise of Tomorrow?

The heart of a procrastinator believes tomorrow is a promise. However, when we are honest with ourselves, we know God hasn't promised that. We aren't guaranteed tomorrow. In fact, we aren't even promised the rest of this day. We are stewards of the only moment we are given—which is now.

When we procrastinate on the things we know we should do, we are assuming a confidence in the future that is unwise. In fact, the Bible even goes so far as to call it *sin*.

Look here, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit." How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that." Otherwise you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil. Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it. (James 4:13–17 NLT)

These verses aren't saying "Don't make plans." They are advising us to submit our plans to the Lord and be obedient to Him and His timing.

There are times when God says *wait*. Sometimes we do get ahead of God and focus on our own plans. But in this book, I'm going to address the opposite problem—when God is saying *go* and we say no.

Verse 17 sends a clear message to procrastinators: “Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it” (NLT).

Thankfully, procrastination is also an issue we can address. When we are honest about ourselves, and make simple changes in how we think and act, we can immediately impact our lives. We can turn our days around, focusing our best energy on our highest priorities. And we can tame those multipage to-do lists.

My goal in dealing with procrastination isn't to get more done. I want to get more of the *right* things done. And eliminate the nagging guilt that keeps me from fully resting and enjoying downtime.

Our best work pushes us, challenges us, and stretches us. It's what we were created to do, and it will demand our highest focus and attention. But the rewards will be just as great.

Is it time for you to deal with procrastination in your life too? Would you like to join me? I'm pretty sure we'll have more success together than if we try this alone.



### *Practical Application*

I imagine you have thoughts about what you'd like to change in your life. Perhaps you have some everyday tasks that pile up, like laundry or mail. Or you have some goals that seem too big so you ignore them, like planning a vacation or organizing your craft room.

Rather than feel overwhelmed, what if you identified two tasks or projects you'd like to tackle? Just two. One small and one large. Imagine what it would feel like to finally manage those areas well . . . to finally pursue that dream of your heart. How would it impact your daily life? Would you have more peace? Would you have more joy? More purpose?

If you'd like to end this book with at least two areas of success, I invite you to identify those two areas right now. Write them on this page or in a journal. We'll revisit your progress as we move through the book. I believe God will give you personal insight into the reasons behind your procrastination, and together we'll find practical ways to get you started.

I'd like to better manage this regular task:

I'd like to address this personal goal: