

The History of Speed

Pastor Paul started off our small group series, I'm Fine, Just Busy, last week describing the great problem that we all face in society today: Busyness. Hurry. The Hustle and Bustle. It is a topic that all of us battle and face in our society today. It pulls and tugs at us in ways that perhaps weren't as impactful a mere 150 years ago.

In today's lesson, I want to give us a breakdown of the history of speed. How did society begin this process of growing more and more rushed? What items have only enhanced this process? How is it affecting me?

I am going to share a lot of dates and facts with you in this lesson. I know some of you are now greatly excited. You thrive on history lessons and learning new things. Others, you have inwardly groaned and are considering turning off this video. The goal of this lesson is not to bore you, but to give some helpful framework and foundation for many of the lessons that will follow.

1. The foundation of cultural speed

It is hard for me to imagine a world without time. It's hard to imagine a time without clocks - both mechanical or digital. But for the majority of human history that was the normal. Most of history did not revolve around the 24 hour system that controls all of modern life today. There were no 9-5s. There was no, "I'll meet you for coffee at 3 pm." Your system of time was largely morning, mid-day, and evening.

Society, which was largely built around farming culture, moved with the rising and the setting of the sun. This began to change with the invention of the Sundial in 200 BC. For the first time in human history, a device had been created to help give structure to a day.

However, with it came some major restrictions - It could not be carried on your wrist, or in your pocket, and was largely restricted to major city squares. Historians estimate that by 1000 AD, so over 1000 years from the invention of the sundial, less than 1% of people had access to a sundial. Additionally, based on one's location and the season, the length of time for "hours" were radically different from other places, and even compared to other others in the same day on the same sundial.¹

¹ Ruthless Elimination of Hurry, Comer, p. 25

This “problem” of time keeping took another step forward in 600 AD when St. Benedict created a system for a daily schedule oriented around 7 times of prayer. This laid the foundation for the largest advancement in time keeping when monks created the first mechanical clock set to these 7 times of prayer in the 1200s. In 1370, the first public clock was erected in Cologne, Germany.²³

Culture now had a strict time keeping system by which all industries could set specific hours for their employees. The cultural effect was devastating in the minds of several philosophers and historians of the day.

French medievalist Jacques Le Goff wrote “Before that, time was natural. It was linked to the rotation of the earth on its axis and the four seasons. You went to bed with the moon and got up with the sun. Days were long and busy in summer, short and slow in winter. There was a rhythm to the day and even the year. Life was ‘dominated by agrarian rhythms, free of haste, careless of exactitude, unconcerned by productivity,’”⁴

One author expressed it this way: “But the clock changed all that: it created artificial time—the slog of the nine-to-five all year long. We stopped listening to our bodies and started rising when our alarms droned their oppressive siren—not when our bodies were done resting.”⁵

Daniel Boorstin, in his biography of Western Culture, stated “Here was man’s declaration of independence from the sun, new proof of his mastery over himself and his surroundings. Only later would it be revealed that he had accomplished this mastery by putting himself under the dominion of a machine with imperious demands all its own.”⁶

The foundation was now set. Gone were the subjective, slow-paced days of the rural, agrarian culture. In its place, a system of productivity and rigidity was put in place. However, there was still a significant limitation for the pace of the day: Darkness

² *Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, Comer, p. 29

³ Carl Honore, *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 22.

⁴ Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980), 44.

⁵ *Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, Comer, p. 30

⁶ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers: A history of Man’s Search to Know His World and Himself* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 39.

2. The "flourishing" of the industrial revolution

By now, you should understand that I use the term flourishing, tongue-in-cheek. If the speed of the day had grown quicker with the invention of the clock, it was about to multiply exponentially. Efficiency would now take its place as the king of American culture.

The year, 1879. The man, Thomas Edison. The invention, electric light through his incandescent light bulb. Mankind was now suddenly freed from the restriction of darkness. Workers could stay later at the shop, the factory, the store. Mankind was now able to become the most productive it had ever been.⁷

Understand my heart here, I am not saying that any of these inventions are in and of themselves bad things. I have used my clock several times today. I have taken advantage of lightbulbs countless times. In fact I am using dozens of them to create the lighting for this video. They are not in and of themselves bad, however, it began a culture that began to pursue production and profit above all else. It was about how fast and how long people could work.

The first item to feel the impact of the lightbulb was people's sleep. It was now convenient and feasible for the first time to stay up past sunset. Before the invention of the lightbulb, the average person slept 11 hrs a night.⁸

Now, the average person gets 7 hrs. The speed of life was rapidly increasing while one of the most important components of rest was being rapidly shortened.⁹

The industrial revolution created many things that radically shaped the American culture beyond the lightbulb: 24 hour factories utilizing shift workers, the harmonization of time zones, and the assembly line. What was the growing concern about the rise of all these new technology? Americans would be too.....lazy. The growing concern was that Americans would now have the most amount of leisure they had ever had because work would be so much simpler and easier now.¹⁰

⁷ *To hell with the Hustle*, Bethke, p. 36

⁸ Arwen Curry, "How Electric Light Changed the Night," KQED, January 20, 2015, www.kqed.org/science/26331/how-electric-light-changed-the-night.

⁹ *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, Comer, p. 32.

¹⁰ Historical Timeline—Farmers and the Land," https://www.agclassroom.org/gan/timeline/farmers_land.htm

Economist John Keynes said in 1915, "For the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem," and that is 'how to occupy the leisure.'¹¹

One famous Senate subcommittee in 1967 was told that by 1985, the average American would work only twenty-two hours a week for twenty-seven weeks a year. Everybody thought the main problem in the future would be too much leisure.¹²

Anyone with a brain is not shaking their head at the naivety of those statements. What has actually happened? American culture has only grown busier. There is more to things to accomplish, more things to get done, more things to pickup, and the lists keep growing. With the increase of the industrial revolution, came the increase of consumerism.

Americans work on average four more weeks per year than they did in 1979. Additionally, there also began a rapid growth of dual-income households as the need for more money to adopt the growing consumerism of American culture perfectly aligned with the growing need for more workers in America.¹³

Even with the growing busyness, there was still a natural rest built into the American culture as most cities in the US had restrictions on businesses open on Sundays. For most, the weekend was a time of rest and sabbath that served as an offset to the growing busyness. However, this began to change in the 1960s with the repeal of blue laws in many places.¹⁴

Up till now, I discussed the history of speed in terms of time keeping, and even the work environment, but if most of us honest with ourselves, there is another aspect of modern American culture that has continued to increase our hurry and hustle.

3. The Modern epidemic of technology

There have been few inventions that can be placed into the category of "changing the course of human history." The printing press, the clock, and the light bulb are a few of

¹¹ Quoted in Derek Thompson, "Workism Is Making Americans Miserable," *Atlantic*, February 24, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/religion-workism-making-americans-miserable/583441/>

¹² *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, Comer, p. 33

¹³ Lawrence Mishel, "Vast Majority of Wage Earners Are Working Harder, and for Not Much More: Trends in U.S. Work hours and Wages over 1979-2007," *Economy Policy Institute*, January 30, 2013, www.epi.org/publication/ib348-trends-us-work-hours-wages-1979-2007.

¹⁴ *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, Comer, p. 35

those inventions. Perhaps none have shaken humanity to its core as the invention that was first announced in 2007.

Can anyone guess what that invention was? If you said the iPhone, you nailed it. With the invention of the “Smart phone” came many other inventions that began to fight for our time and our brain’s attention. 2007 also saw the start of Facebook, Twitter, first year of cloud storage, the App Store is brought online.¹⁵

Before I give us some stats on this topic, I want to ask you a question. While listening to this lesson, how many of you picked up your phone to do something? If you are watching on your phone, did you swipe out of the app to take of something else while it continued playing?

For most of us, myself included, we have developed an addiction to technology that has become second nature. We don’t even recognize it.

Here are some stats on technology and its correlation to a culture of speed and busyness.

The internet is decreasing our IQ’s and our capacity to pay attention. Nicholas Carr’s Pulitzer Prize–nominated book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* is still the seminal work on this evolution (or devolution?). He wrote: “the internet is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation.”¹⁶

The average Boomer iPhone user touches their phone 2,617 times a day. The average user is on their phone for 2 1/2 hours over 76 sessions.¹⁷

For millennials, that number is doubled. For Gen Z, that number is astronomical. The analysis reports that screen time for Gen Zers is an average of seven hours and seven minutes per day (+6.5% in one year), and 49 hours and seven minutes per week. According to the report, the Gen Z average exceeds that of the global mobile screen time average by 104%, and the US average by 92%.¹⁸

¹⁵ *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, Comer, p. 35

¹⁶ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows*

¹⁷ Julia Naftulin, “Here’s How Many Times We Touch Our Phones Every Day,” *Business Insider*, July 13, 2016, www.businessinsider.com/dscout-research-people-touch-cell-phones-2617-times-a-day-2016-7.

¹⁸ Kari Paul, “Millennials Waste Five Hours A Day Doing This One Thing,” *New York Post*, May 18, 2017, <https://nypost.com/2017/05/18/millennials-waste-five-hours-a-day-doing-this-one-thing>.

"A similar study found that just being in the same room as our phones (even if they are turned off) "will reduce someone's working memory and problem-solving skills." Translation: they make us dumber. As one summary of the report put it, "If you grow dependent on your smartphone, it becomes a magical device that silently shouts your name at your brain at all times."¹⁹

Technology has consumed every aspect of our lives. Again, the point is not that technology is altogether bad. I love being able to get directions on my phone instead of spending 12 hours trying to figure out how to unfold and then refold a paper map. The point is, we as an American culture have allowed our addiction to technology to consume our lives and leave us feeling busier and busier and busier.

This is mostly because there is no off switch. We are able to be contacted 24/7 through our cellular devices. Whether it is checking social media, our emails, our texts, our calls, there is always something waiting to connect us back to our phones.

Beyond cell phone usage comes entertainment in general. The conservative estimate is that average American consumes 1,200 hours of television in a year. About **70% of Americans** engage in binge-watching, averaging **five episodes per sitting**. The average American watches 10 movies a month.

Beyond that, the modern culture of America has placed an expectation in the minds of parents that my kid must be a part of "everything" or I have somehow robbed them of their childhood. The greatest thing we can teach our young people is the concept of rest, margin, moderation, and limitation. I can not, and should not, do everything.

The greatest pitfall and lie that we can convince ourselves of within this topic of speed is that our time in technology is rest. It is in fact the opposite.

As we continue on in this series, we will talk about what true rest is and how to include it into our lives so that we are not consumed by busyness.

Why is it important to understand the history of speed and its massive influence on American culture? I will leave us with this quote: "Michael Zigarelli from the Charleston Southern University School of Business conducted the Obstacles to Growth Survey of over twenty thousand Christians across the globe and identified busyness as a major distraction from spiritual life. Listen carefully to his hypothesis: It may be the case that (1) Christians are assimilating to a culture of busyness, hurry and overload, which leads

¹⁹ Robinson Meyer, "Your SmartPhone Reduces Your Brainpower, Even If It's Just Sitting There: A Silent, Powered-Off Phone Can Still Distract The Most Dependent Users," *Atlantic*, August 2, 2017.

to (2) God becoming more marginalized in Christians' lives, which leads to (3) a deteriorating relationship with God, which leads to (4) Christians becoming even more vulnerable to adopting secular assumptions about how to live, which leads to (5) more conformity to a culture of busyness, hurry and overload. And then the cycle begins again."²⁰

For our homework and conversation this week, I want us to take some time and evaluate our current screen time. Over the course of the summer, keep tracking it. The goal is to see growth and healthier habits. (Use provided checklist .pdf on website). Additionally, screenshot your screen time.

²⁰ *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, Comer, p. 38