



# Personal Organization for the Sake of Fruitful Ministry<sup>1</sup>

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Some people may think it weird or merely the sign of an obsessive personality, but I get butterflies when I walk into an Office Depot. Even the thought of notebooks, filing cabinets, planners, and binders gets me excited. Oh for more sticky notes and file-folders with reinforced tabs! And, for those who think I am stuck in a bygone era of space-devouring paper goods: yes, I love Evernote and Pocket and Dropbox. I've even been known to block out serious chunks of time (like, on the calendar) to organize my MacBook's files and de-clutter the desktop.

I have a passion for organization.

But not everyone shares my enthusiasm for drawer dividers and label makers. Through conversation and general observation over the years it has become clear that there are people who find an overly-organized work environment stifling when it comes to their creativity and productivity. Others have concluded that setting aside time to index their notes, catalog their books, assemble all their files according to appropriate categories,

and establish a system of “productivity processes” actually takes away from time in which they can be creative and productive.

While I do not want to quarrel with those whose personality seems to require a certain amount of, shall we say, workspace flexibility, I do want to challenge the assumption that careful attention to organization kills creativity and productivity.

In fact, I would contend that organization is an indispensable key to both.

## **MINISTRY AND ORGANIZATION**

When it comes to ministry, then, Christians should give some serious thought to organization. If we are called to be fruitful and rich in good works—a calling that involves both creativity and productivity—then we should gladly embrace any means that enable us to abound in these things.

Take, for example, a well-organized desk. The effort it takes to plan and maintain an orderly desk may be significant, but the payoff far outweighs the time and energy required to set up your workspace and routinely return everything to its place. More to the point: an organized desk enables you to do a greater amount good for others than you could do with a disorderly desk. In his discussion of promoting effective productivity practices, Matt Perman makes this important link between organization and fruitfulness.

First, good productivity practices

reduce the friction in doing good, thus making doing good easier and more likely. For example, I have a series on my blog about how to set up your desk. I think it’s pretty fun to have your desk set up well. But what’s the ultimate reason a good desk set up matters to me? Because setting up your desk effectively helps you be more effective in serving others. It means that instead of having your stuff all over, getting in your way and creating friction in your life, you can operate in a smooth and efficient way to focus on what you really need to get done” (Matt Perman, *What’s Best Next*, 87).

So, the cultivation of effective organizational habits is not merely for your own convenience; it is for the good of others. When we, as Perman observes, “remove the friction in doing good” by maintaining an orderly workspace, we are freed to serve others more effectively.

But it doesn’t stop at your desk.

Consider the other areas of your life in which your ability to readily and intentionally meet needs would be enhanced by giving greater attention to organization.

## **YOUR FINANCES**

If you maintain an orderly budget, keep track of your spending, itemize your savings, and intentionally set aside funds for specific uses, you can know exactly how much you are able to give when

urgent needs arise. You will have a keen grasp on how much you take in each month, how much you need to live on, and how much you can give away. In this way, organization does not stifle generosity; it encourages it. And in the long run, a Christian who maintains an orderly budget will most likely give more than the person who thinks they are being more “spiritual” by giving according to their spontaneous impulses. It’s counter-intuitive, but a person who only gives “when the Spirit moves” and never gets a handle on their finances usually won’t give very much over a given year. They might think they are generous, but in terms of actual numbers, they are surprisingly stingy.

### **YOUR POSSESSIONS**

When you maintain an orderly living space, you are able better to provide specific goods to those who are in need. You need a sleeping bag for a mission trip? It’s in the garage on the second shelf from the bottom; I’ll have it to you by tomorrow. Do I have any books on eschatology? Yes, in the attic, the two boxes on the far left. I’ll bring you a stack on Sunday. Clothes for an 18 month old boy? In a bin near the front of the closet upstairs; you can swing by on Wednesday to pick them up.

On the other hand, when your possessions are unaccounted for and left in disorderly heaps around the house

and garage and attic, you are unable to quickly and effectively supply needs. Moreover, disorganization can lead to a poor stewardship of your finances as you repurchase things you already own—whether for your own needs or for the needs of others.

### **YOUR TIME**

Your time is much like your money: if you want to be generous with it, you must get organized. Take a given week for example. If you neglect to plan how you will use your time each day, you will most likely waste a lot of precious minutes (which add up to hours and days and years) that you will not be able to spend serving others. You will also be unable to determine how much time you can spend on a particular project or with a person to whom you are ministering.

In the latter example, if you are unwilling to organize your schedule, you might find that the time you spend with people is often characterized by several “watch checks” and the inability to really concentrate on others because you are weighed down by the anxiety of not knowing exactly how much time you are able to give to a particular situation. Knowing how much time you are able to give to a person in need allows you to concentrate fully on and listen carefully to them. Granted, there are times when God will stretch our schedules and keep us in one place for longer than we planned; but, generally speaking we will find that we enhance our time with oth-

ers when we keep an orderly schedule.

### **YOUR STUDY**

When I ponder the importance of disciplined, orderly study, I am reminded of John “Rabbi” Duncan, a man who, though godly, never reached his potential as a theologian due to his inability to organize his pursuit of knowledge. In the introduction to Duncan’s brief biography, we learn that despite his great teaching ability, his failure to impose structure and exercise intentionality in his studies significantly limited his contribution to the Christian world.

These [teaching] endowments, however, were counteracted by certain weaknesses which hindered his usefulness. There was a lack of any plan in his acquisition of knowledge. He had a fatal tendency to miscellaneous. He was often carried away intellectually with some engrossing mental problem or absorbed spiritually with some enquiry into the state of his soul. Furthermore, he was utterly unmethodical in everything but the arrangement of his thoughts. The greatest defect of his character, however, was, as Dr. Moody Stuart points out, weakness of purpose. ‘You could not name any living man whom you could so easily turn aside in judgment from what he had approved, or in execution from what he had intended.’ This irregularity in work was fatal to his potential power as a professor and scholar. In this realm he was rather a great possibility than a great realization. (‘Just a Talker’: Sayings of John (‘Rabbi’) Duncan, xxix.)

Sadly, Duncan was not as fruitful as he could have been due to a simple lack of organization in his life. And how many of us, who read much and study much, because we are unwilling to establish an effective note keeping and retrieval system, are limiting our contribution to our families, our churches, and our schools? How much valuable truth and useful knowledge are you now unable to pass along to others because you never troubled yourself to write it down and file it away?

These are not a questions of personality—whether we consider ourselves a “Duty Fulfiller” or an “Idealist” or a “Doer” or a “Thinker”—these are questions of stewardship and how we are using the resources God has entrusted to us. Organization may come more naturally to some, but it is needed for anyone who desires to effectively serve others.

So, even if you don’t consider yourself an organized person, I encourage you to consider the ways your ministry to others and your capacity to do good would be enhanced by a little more attention to where you keep your pens and how you track your budget.

### **ENDNOTES**

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