

What Do You Do When You Have Nothing to Do?

By Daryl Wingerd

You probably have more free time than you think you do. By “free time,” I mean time that is not already allocated for some scheduled, necessary, daily or weekly routine type of activity—in other words, time when you are free to *choose* what to do, with no pressing obligations.



Now some of you are already saying, “I don’t have any (or much) of that kind of time, so there’s no need for me to keep reading.” Perhaps you are a stay-at-home mom with small children, or a sole-provider father working two jobs to put food on the table, or a college student working your way through school, or a bi-vocational pastor (like me), juggling church, work, and family responsibilities. I know it can *feel* like you have no “free time.” But before checking out of this discussion and plodding on in what you perceive as your moment-by-moment, just-keeping-your-head-above-water life of busyness, humor me as I do some math.

Last time I checked, the average week still contains 168 hours. You probably sleep about 56 of these hours (teens perhaps a bit more, and most adults probably somewhat less). Most people’s mode of employment takes up no more than 55 hours per week (U.S. average work hours per week is only about 33, with full-time salaried employees spending an average of about 50 hours per week at work. So 55 is actually a bit high but it allows for unusual extremes). Let’s throw in 8 hours per week for household tasks (lawn care, home and car maintenance, etc.). Then we’ll add 10 hours for eating meals (again, probably a bit high in our eat-on-the-run culture). We’ll also include 2 hours per day—14 hours per week—for important personal/family/relational time (exercise, date nights, time spent talking with your spouse, scheduled time with friends, reading with the children, playing games as a family, going to the park together, watching movies together, etc.). Then there’s personal Bible study and prayer time—we’ll estimate that at one hour per day, so 7 hours per week. And let’s not forget time spent with your church—we’ll allow 8 hours for this each week, including Sunday mornings and evenings, plus mid-week Bible studies (once again, probably somewhat high for most people).

Wow! That seems like a very full week! But believe it or not, even with my rather high estimates of how your *allocated* time is taken up, you still have 10 hours of *unallocated* time left in the week described above.

Before going further, I need to acknowledge the dilemma of the stay-at-home mom with small children, especially those who are pre-school or homeschooled.

In one sense, her life doesn’t really fit my math. She is “on duty” all 168 hours every week, juggling laundry, meal preparation, caring for children, homeschooling children, and so forth. Small children don’t stop being needy during what you would like to think of as “free time,” even when they are asleep—even if you can get them all to go to sleep at the same time! But the prospect of free time is not gone for the stay-at-home mom, or for her husband who (hopefully) shares the load at home when he is not at work. With dads helping moms and moms helping dads to “escape” now and then, and with a healthy dose of household order—small children being trained to submit to regular, *early* bedtimes and afternoon quiet time or naptime (even if they fail to fall asleep)—a few hours of “free time” can be strategically created.

So my question pertains to everyone, even to the stay-at-home mom: what do you do when you have nothing to do?

In case you’re wondering, I’m not about to give you a guilt-producing list of what Christians *should be* doing with their free time. While I would certainly discourage you from wasting your free time or using it to pursue harmful or ungodly habits, my main goal is to encourage you to use your free time in whatever ways bring you joy and satisfaction.

We were created by God to be curious, creative, industrious and productive—to subdue the earth around us and enjoy it. This mandate still exists and can be pursued through our daily work, but it may also be experienced during our free time through the creative arts, through music, and through interests such as gardening, woodworking, or inventing. Use the time to develop and hone a new skill, to develop and pursue a hobby, to learn or improve at a sport you enjoy, or to learn something new about history or biology or botany or zoology. Read a good book of fiction if that’s what you enjoy doing. If it would make you happy, use some of your free time to just sit and think quietly in a comfortable chair. Who knows! If the dogs and kids stay quiet long enough, you might even fall asleep and get some needed extra rest!

None of these pursuits should be allowed to become all-consuming interests that use up all your resources, distract you from your daily duties, or hinder your faithfulness as a follower of Christ. But none of them are inherent stumbling blocks either. In my estimation, they should not be thought of as frivolous, wasteful, or useless, but rather, as excellent things to do when you have nothing to do.