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Dealing With Burnout (Part 2 of 2)



By Pastor George

In Part 1 of this article we talked about the reality of “burnout” – its prevalence among ministers, its symptoms, and some of its more harmful practical effects. We discussed how this psychological phenomenon impacts pastors in the office, in the pulpit, and at home with spouse and kids. I closed with a promise to give you some specific advice for avoiding “burnout.” Here are some of the syndrome’s most common symptoms and a few suggestions for dealing with them.

Lack of rest: To avoid burnout you have to be spiritually, mentally, physically, and relationally healthy. This isn’t easy to achieve, of course—sometimes the ministry can be so consuming that rest seems impossible. That’s why Jesus’ words to His disciples are so important: “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while. For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” (Mark 6:11)

If you don’t intentionally schedule rest, it will not happen. Here is the rule that I try to live by: Whatever is on the calendar first wins. I don’t change the calendar unless it is an emergency by my definition. I recommend that you sit down with your spouse and schedule time for recreation, study, a day off, and your vacation. Then, when you get a request to do this or that, you can honestly say, “I am sorry but I have an appointment.” It’s important to maintain this boundary and protect your time off.

“It’s useless to rise early and go to bed late, and work your worried fingers to the bone. Don’t you know he enjoys giving rest to those he loves?” (Psalms 127:2 TMNT)

The empty tank: Feeling down and depleted? Then cultivate some interests that are not directly related to your ministry. What is it that fills your emotional tank? Sports, gardening, fishing, woodworking, reading, hiking, camping, golf, or music are just a few activities that offer healthy and refreshing distractions from the work of the pastorate. Personally, I do a lot of camping with my wife.

Unrealistic expectations: Being a pastor was never intended to be a one-man show. You must adjust your expectations so that your activities in ministry align with your natural talent and spiritual gifting. Begin by realizing that there are times when you must simply say no to the expectations of others who want you to function outside your boundaries. Then help those you minister with to discover their gifts and give them room for expression and growth. In other words, learn to delegate. You'd be surprised what a difference it can make (See Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12).

Negativity: Let's face it, ministry can turn you sour. We face disappointment in others and ourselves. In Proverbs 4:23 we are instructed to "guard our hearts." One practical way of doing this is to develop a sense of humor. Laughter is an antidote to cynicism and sarcasm. It lowers blood pressure and reduces certain stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline. It is simply "good medicine" (see Proverbs 15:13, 15, 17:22).

One of my life passages is Philippians 4:4-7. Mediating and practicing these verses keeps my heart in check and my negativity at bay.

Isolation: Isolationism happens when we become self-focused on our preferences, our needs, our desires, our goals, our ministry, etc. This is a common theme in ministry that too often leads to loneliness, discouragement, and burnout. It is a tool of the enemy that in the end can lead to utter ruin. In the book of Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 we read, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!" The old adage is so true: "No man is an island." We are simply better together than we can be separately! So be intentional about developing peer relationships that include authentic accountability.

Pride: As ministers of God's grace we must never become so confident in ourselves and what we have achieved that we cease to remember that it is "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). Our faith and our calling do not rest in the wisdom of man but in the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:5, Ephesians 1:1).

Remember that you "are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10)."

I love Paul's statement of humility. "But by the grace of God I am what I am..." (1 Corinthians 15:10; compare Romans 12:3). That's exactly the perspective we need if we're going to win the battle against burnout.

Take an honest look at yourself. As ministers we understand that our lives are often filled with wounds, disappointment, financial hardship, and fears that have the capacity to affect us negatively. Burnout can cloud the reality of our calling and minimize the redemptive story of our lives. I have seen too many pastors slip into self-doubt and fall into old habits, thus compromising themselves and others (see James 1:26; 2 Corinthians 13:5, Psalm 39:1, Deuteronomy 4:9).

It is imperative to understand that God cares more about who we are in Him than what we do for Him. Personal integrity in all areas of our life is more important than charisma and gifting. That's why Paul exhorts Timothy to watch his life and doctrine so closely

(1Timothy 4:12). In another passage, the same apostle urges all of us to examine our lives and “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called (Ephesians 4:1; compare 1 Corinthians 9:27).

Recognize when you need help and get it. It’s humbling to admit that you of all people might need help – right? It was humbling for me too! But that’s no reason to hold back from seeking the assistance you need. As a matter of fact, Focus on the Family’s chaplains and counselors would love to come alongside you if you think it might be worthwhile to discuss your situation with a trained professional. You can reach them weekdays from 6:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. (MT) at 1-855-771-HELP (4537). Remember that the call is free to you and absolutely confidential!

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