

SPIRITUAL LIFE, SERVICE, AND BURNOUT

THE ISSUES AND PROBLEMS OF BURNOUT IN SERVANTS

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INTRODUCTION – TESTIMONY & ASSESSMENT

I want to begin by reading something:

“Something is definitely wrong. I don’t feel the joy I used to experience in ministry anymore. I don’t want to be this way but sometimes I just can’t help it – I find myself dreading to do the very things that God has called me to do. What is going on? I know I shouldn’t be this way but it’s not something I can change by forcing myself not to think this way. I feel overwhelmed. Why does it feel like my responsibilities are growing exponentially? I’m not sure if I can handle this. I know I’m going to make a mistake very soon and I’m going to disappoint a lot of people because I just don’t have the strength and ability to carry out all these things. I don’t know if I have what it takes to continue. I’m finding myself constantly growing in bitterness, dissatisfaction, and discontentment too. What is wrong with me? I preach and teach others that your circumstances shouldn’t dictate the state of your heart – but here I am struggling and failing. I should persevere. I need to pray and spend more time with God but I don’t have this hunger and thirst for His presence. I feel scared – I feel scared of people and making mistakes. Why can’t I just suck it up? I need a break. God, help me to remain in You for I know that true joy and life can only be found in you. It’s difficult for me to understand and experience this truth right now. I don’t know what to do.”

This is something that I wrote in my journal in the past. If any of this sounds familiar and you can relate to it, you may be experiencing burnout as I was back then. We want to address this issue because this is a reality for many of us but we, as a church, don’t talk about it as much as we should. So that’s what we want to do.

But as we begin this time, there is one foundational truth that I want to begin with – and it’s that **we are finite beings**. We are not God. We are not infinite in our strength, wisdom, power, and abilities. We don’t have unlimited time and energy. We run out of gas. We run out of patience and motivation. We cannot muster up all these things within ourselves. **This is why our relationship with God matters**. We must go to the One who is the source of all things. **This is why community matters**.

As I mentioned earlier, the reality is that many of us, who are serving at church, do experience burnout. Some of you may have gone through a season of burnout and are now recovering or some of you are going through this right now and it has been difficult and weighty on your heart. Some of you may have yet to experience this, which is great. **What we want to accomplish today is to help you assess yourself so that you can either overcome it if you are burnt out or prevent it if you are doing well right now.** This is absolutely important for many reasons:

It will protect your relationship with God. It will also protect your relationship with others. And it will protect our church. COAH is a community. Without you guys, this community cannot function properly. I'm not just saying this to motivate and make you guys work more. I want to address a biblical truth: **this church is not the same without you.** And as the leaders of this church, we want to teach you, discipline you, equip you, and protect you, so that you don't experience burnout – so that you can joyfully and effectively serve God and this community.

This is why we started our time with an assessment of how we have been doing in our services. So how are you guys doing? Have you grown or do you find yourself static or even regressing in your faith and love for God and this church? Are you overflowing with joy or are you finding yourself complaining and blaming others? **It is important for you to understand clearly where you are today so that we can move forward.**

DEFINITION – SCRIPTURE

So how do we define burnout? Dictionary.com puts it like this:

- **Fatigue, frustration, or apathy resulting from prolonged stress, overwork, or intense activity; total exhaustion; inability to go on**

Do you know any examples of burnout in the Bible? One example can be found in 1 Kings 19. If you're not sure what this story is about: In chapter 18, we see Elijah experiencing victory over 450 prophets of Baal. These prophets would pray, cry, dance, and even cut themselves to get the attention of Baal to come and accept their sacrifices but as we know there was no response from Baal. Elijah on the other hand simply prayed that God would show Himself to these people – and fire came down from heaven and consumed the altar. **In this chapter, Elijah is bold and courageous – facing all kinds of odds with the power of God. But in chapter 19, everything changes – we find Elijah fearful, running scared, exhausted, depressed, and wanting to die.** What caused him to change so quickly? *It was because his life was threatened.* The Bible tells us that Jezebel, who was the queen of Israel and also a worshipper of Baal, reacted with anger and pursued after Elijah to kill him. After he hears this, Elijah's response is explained in verses 3-5:

“Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.”

Aren't we sometimes like this too? We're excited to serve God – and we experience many victories but when something happens, we fall so hard. Look at some of the things that happened to Elijah – it's something that happens to those who are burnout:

- Loss of purpose in life – wanting to quit everything and run away
- Distorted perspective on himself – I'm a nobody
- Feeling alone in the world – I feel like I'm doing this by myself
- Being filled with resentment and bitterness – no one appreciates me
- Feeling that all is hopeless – just take my life God; I've had enough.

And the result was that it really shattered Elijah's focus and his faith until God intervened.

SYMPTOMS

What about us? What are some real-life symptoms of burnout that we may face today?

- 1) **You are beginning to despise people and your compassion for them is continually decreasing rather than increasing.** You're losing your focus. You're not even sure why you're doing the things that you're doing.
- 2) **You often think about doing something other than serving.** You're just constantly thinking of when you can take a break or quit the ministry. Maybe you're just waiting for a good reason to come up so that there is a "legitimate" reason to step down. You're more excited about ministry time ending than going into it.
- 3) **Joy is something you talk about but are not experiencing for yourself.** You know you must experience joy as Christians so you continue to talk about it with others – and you might even encourage and help others to be joyful but you don't experience it for yourself. There is a loss of joy in serving Christ. It feels more like a duty and burden.
- 4) **You are disconnected from the people.** You don't want to engage with others. You spend more time online or watching TV or playing games than you do with others.
- 5) **You also find yourself wanting to sleep all of the time or you're just fatigued.** I heard some people say that we should sacrifice sleep to do more of God's work for His Kingdom – this is a Spirit-filled thing to do. And yes, it's partially true. But if your 4-hour sleep is causing you to be sensitive and short-tempered, then the Holy Spirit is telling you to go to sleep.
- 6) **You continually tell yourself and those you love that "this is just a really busy season and that you will slow down soon."** But the truth is that you have been most likely saying this for years. But we must remember that life will always be busy.
- 7) **You are continually becoming obsessed with what others say about you.** One negative comment from *someone who does not like you* can put you in an incredibly deep scar and cause you to feel discouraged and even hopeless.
- 8) **You may feel like you're always giving and not receiving.** You feel like you're not receiving what you deserve. It becomes about fighting for our "rights."
- 9) **You feel ineffective in what you do. You feel like you're not that important.**
- 10) **You find yourself growing in complaints, grumbling, criticism, and sighing.** You're looking for others to blame. Sometimes you might be angry at God.
- 11) **You might be in a dry season in your walk with God.** You are not bearing any fruit in your life. You're not disciplined. There is no hunger and thirst for more of Him. Serving isn't helping you – it feels like it's pulling you down. You rarely turn to the Bible or pray. You certainly don't take time to share the gospel to others and invite them to our church. It feels like work.
- 12) **Other people are expressing concerns for you.** A lot of times, we cannot see ourselves clearly. But others can. So your parents, spouse, friends, or leaders could be warning you today to be careful.

Of course, there could be many more symptoms that I didn't address here. But did any of these things resonate with you today? If you are, you might be going through a burnout right now.

CAUSES

I think an important thing that we must understand is then **why do Christians burn out?** I've categorized this section into four. Here are the four causes of burnout in Christians: **wrong priorities, motivation, ministry, and way.**

WRONG PRIORITIES

We must continue to remind ourselves that our serving is most satisfying and effective when it flows out of a close and growing relationship with God. Ironically, when we're most involved with doing church work, we feel like we have the least time for our own life with God. A lot of us are "Christian workaholics." Because of what we have to do, we don't actually spend time with God.

Who does this remind you of? Martha. In Luke 10, we see Jesus visiting Martha and Mary's house. It tells us that Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to what He had to say. In contrast, Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made and she began to compare and complain saying, "*Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!*" And listen to what Jesus says in verse 41: "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*" Mary has chosen what is better. Jesus is not saying that what Martha was doing was unimportant. **Sure, these are some of the things that must be done – but not at the cost of what is better.**

When I was in seminary, people often called seminaries *cemeteries*. It was because so many people who enter seminary used their studies as a substitute for their devotion time with God. They would say things like, "I'm studying about God. That's good enough quiet time for me." And what ends up happening is that a lot of them become dead spiritually. They might have grown in their knowledge but they come out dead and I've seen a number of people walking away from ministry to pursue other career options. **Brothers and sisters, are you constantly choosing what is better?** If you are not intentionally turning to God, you will begin to be deceived in thinking that you're a good Christian because you're *doing* lots for God when the reality is that you're constantly regressing in your walk with God. There is no intimacy. **And when God who is the ultimate source of our joy and power is absence in our lives, we will undoubtedly experience burnout because we are finite beings.** If this is true, we must turn to God and ask Him to teach us how we can reorder our lives to have Him at the center of our lives and to experience everything flowing out of a vital relationship with Him. We must be like Mary – have our priorities right.

WRONG MOTIVATION

What is your motivation for serving today? What is constantly feeding that passion to continue in your serving? We must recognize that trying to please or impress people in the church is absolutely deadly to our souls. We must never use serving as a way to earn their approval and avoid their criticism. Often Christians who burn out have trouble setting boundaries and are unable to say “no” to the requests and expectations of others. Also, we shouldn’t serve only when there is a need. If this is true, there’s a possibility of making serving about us not about God. There is no drive. We’re just filling up holes. **The desire to serve must continue to overflow as God constantly fills us with His grace.**

Sometimes we become control freaks when it comes to serving and we set high expectations for ourselves. As teachers, we want all of our children to grow up to be super Christians. As a musician, we want to play beautifully for God. As a welcomer, we want all of the visitors to feel at home all the time. As a planner, we want all of the events to go smoothly and perfectly. But we know that this is not always the reality. **So when we don’t see the results of our efforts we hoped to see, we get discouraged.** And when we continually fail to measure up to what we think effectiveness or success looks like, we may become discouraged to the point of wanting to quit. We are disappointed in ourselves, others, and maybe even God. And often, pain and disappointment can turn to bitterness when we believe that God has let us down. Pastor Tim Keller once said, **“Bitterness is believing that God got it wrong.”**

We must have the right motivation if we want to avoid burnout – and **the right motivation is always Jesus. We serve because we want to honor God – to see Him glorified. It is always about Him not about us.** We will be blessed and satisfied to serve God but this is never the motivation for our service – *this is only the result of our serving.* The motivation must always remain as Jesus.

WRONG MINISTRY

Another cause of burnout could be that you are serving in the wrong ministry. Ask these questions: **“Are you doing what you’re wired by God to do? Are you effectively utilizing your spiritual gifts and talents? Are you growing in love for your ministry?”** Many of us end up spending a lot of time and energy doing something for God that is not really our passion or our calling. When this happens, we will grow in frustration which in turn will lead to dissatisfaction and discontentment and ultimately burnout. For example, you’re serving in the music ministry but you can’t sing. You try your best but you just can’t hit that note. So you get frustrated and discouraged – but you might be an amazing welcomer, encourager, teacher, or you name it. This is the kind of thing I’m talking about here. Not to bash people for not having certain kinds of gifts – but encouraging you to know how God has equipped you and serve where you can maximize your talent.

You might already know that you're serving in the wrong ministry but you continue to remain because you don't want to go to a place where God is calling you to go. The reason for your disobedience could be many: you're being stubborn; you want to be more recognized; you want to be noticed; you want to be at the center; etc. **It's time for us to prayerfully examine what God is calling you to do.** You might be in the right place or God may call you to serve in a different place. Are you serving in the right place?

WRONG WAY

Another cause of burnout could be a wrong way of serving. For example, this is something that I'm not very good at but Pastor Jane is a master at this: **delegation**. Maybe you're like me – trying to do everything all by yourself when you could be delegating, building teams, and helping others use their gifts. I hear people say and often say it myself, "I don't want to ask people and burden them. I would rather just do it myself." Yes, working as a team can cause frustration. People may fail to show up or follow through. Others may not be as skilled as you are. Others may make mistakes. **But the solution is not doing it all yourself.**

Another wrong way could be not really seeing the goal and vision of the ministry. You're so tunnel-visioned that you don't even understand the big picture.

It could also be that you're not trained properly.

Or you're just stuck in the status quo and not striving for excellence because of your minimalist perspective which will always lead to apathy.

We must continue to ask for God's wisdom when it comes to how we're serving.

EFFECTS

So far, we looked at the symptoms and causes of burnout. The last thing I will share is the effects of burnout in our lives – and to see how dangerous and destructive it is.

- **We depreciate our worth:** We put ourselves down mentally. Just like Elijah, we say to ourselves, "I'm a nobody. My life doesn't matter. I'm insignificant. I don't count. I have no value." But we know the truth. We are loved and valued in His eyes.
- **We become less approachable:** Because we're welling up with anger, it is being exuded out in our words, attitudes, and actions.
- **We become more vulnerable to sin:** One of the most destructive effects of burnout is the increased susceptibility to sin. We fall into temptations more easily and we no longer fight to resist. Old sinful patterns may return and new ones may develop.
- **We become ineffective and unproductive in what we do**
- **We want to quickly give up our ministry:** We do this because we stop caring.
- **We become less thankful:** We overemphasize what's wrong in our lives and we ignore God's blessing in our lives. We always focus on the negative rather than the positive.

As you can see, burnout can be very destructive to us, our relationship with others, and our relationship with God.

HOPE

What I shared so far sounds very depressing – well, it should because it’s a picture of our brokenness. We experience burnout because we are finite. We experience burnout because we’re broken and sinful. We are absolutely hopeless if we’re left to ourselves. That’s why we can wait for Pastor Peter’s session with anticipation and joy. But to show you a glimpse of hope, I want to share what Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30. This is what Jesus says:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

This case, I actually like how the Message Bible puts it:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Jesus is our hope. But sometimes the world presses in so hard that holding on to that hope can be difficult. That’s why the good news is that **Jesus Himself invites us.** He personally came to us to give us that rest. Then He encourages us to take His yoke upon our shoulders because His yoke is easy and light. **It simply calls us to love God and love one another.** When we remember this truth, all other burdens will fall into their proper place. **Serving won’t be just a duty but it will be our privilege – something that we get to do for His honor and our joy.**