

Self-Care Isn't Selfish

This year has been a difficult one for me. It started out with an overwhelming workload last December that culminated in near burnout at the start of this fall. It led to [some spiritual dissatisfaction](#), some frustration with the shape and progress of my leadership efforts, and some miscommunication/misunderstandings with members of my church.

For the longest time, I simply stopped taking care of myself. I was working far too many hours, I wasn't taking days off, I wasn't engaging in fun activities to recharge my batteries, and I wasn't present with my family, because even when I was physically there I was mentally elsewhere.

As a result, I began to spiral down into a mild depression late in the summer, and I began to question whether or not I was making a difference or whether I was wasting my efforts. I became cynical, bitter, and hopeless. And despite [my super optimistic comments](#) during my first season of pastoral ministry, I was beginning to feel the strain and desperation that so many of my clergy colleagues have talked about, but which I did not understand myself until it was almost too late.

To those of you from the church I serve who are reading this, and maybe hearing about it for the first time, I urge you to pray regularly for me and my family. The pressures and responsibilities of pastoral leadership are very real. I hope you will not be turned off by my honesty, because above all we are called by Christ to embody truth. Without it, there can be

no healing from our wounds or sin. There is nothing that anyone at our church did to foster the sense of burnout I felt coming on me; it was purely a product of too many irons in the fire coupled with the spiritual and emotional pressures of pastoral ministry.

Had it not been for my strong family support and the love of my congregation I don't know if I would be out of the woods yet. Because of their support I have had time to seek God through prayer and scripture and rest, which has led me to some real soul-searching. I began to re-evaluate what the ministry to which I am called should look like, and I began taking steps to pull back in areas that do not match that picture.

I have since begun the painful process of saying no to good opportunities and good people, so that I can become a better pastor to my congregation and a better husband and father to my family. This inevitably leads to personal conflict and hurt feelings from those who don't understand the change, or who might feel that my "no" is a personal rejection. But I am finding newfound freedom by pursuing the things God has laid on my heart as my first priority.

Though I still fail more frequently than I would like, I am also working hard to create space for real Sabbath rest. Because the average person does not understand what a pastor does from week to week, most people will never ask their pastor if he or she is taking sufficient time to rest or to be with family. It is always assumed that we have plenty of time to spare. But this couldn't be farther from the truth. Pastors are as prone as any professional to workaholism, maybe more so, because we are "always on", and our work also encompasses

our personal life.

There are many times when my one day off each week is interrupted by a church event or pastoral care emergency. There are many evenings when my time with family is cut short by calls or text messages from church members that require me to put my "work" hat back on.

Even when I am out having fun with my family I am the pastor. Even when we are having a meal with friends from church, I am the pastor. When I go to the grocery store, or fill my car with gas, or laugh at a joke, or forget to wave at someone from church, I am the pastor. And every action or non-action is interpreted by those who know me in the light of my role in ministry. I do not consider this a negative thing. It is simply a fact. There are many blessings that come from this fact, but there are also many drawbacks. It is no wonder that so many of us in ministry of any sort find it hard to maintain a healthy balance.

Nevertheless, I am slowly, but surely, beginning to heal. I am realizing that my own expectations are often far higher and more burdensome than the expectations of God, my family, or my congregation. And I am learning to let go of the illusion of control. Thanks be to God!

All of this may sound a little bit selfish. Why am I thinking so much about myself and how things affect me? The reason is because none of us can help others, when we are deeply wounded ourselves. Like the safety presentations before every flight in America will tell you, you must put your own oxygen mask on

first and then assist others, or you will soon be no good to anyone.

We may or may not have a crisis brewing among clergy, where burnout is becoming a commonplace occurrence. I just know that I was nearing a crisis point personally, until a few short weeks ago. I am still not fully recovered, but I have hope that I will get back to being 100% at some point in the future.

The antidote to burnout in pastoral ministry is not delegation, or leadership training, or personal retreats. I am convinced the solution can only be found through the deep and abiding presence of Christ. And we cannot experience that depth of relationship, until we allow God to orient our lives and priorities.

The closer I draw to Christ, the more I see his desires for me. They are far simpler and far less grandiose than I have sometimes made them out to be. I believe God wants for me to focus on my relationship with him first, and then out of the abundance of that relationship to love my family and those to whom I minister.

Pastors, we have got to start taking a long, hard look at ourselves. We have got to begin focusing on God's desires for us as his children first, and then figure out how that plays out in our families and ministry. I listened to an interview with N.T. Wright this week on the [200Churches podcast](#), where he summarized so clearly what our main pursuits should be.

Learn to pray. Learn to read the Bible. Learn to love people.

If we learn to do those three things, I have to believe we will begin to see less pastoral burnout and more joyful servants.

In the coming weeks, I will spend some time thinking and writing about spiritual self-care. I want to encourage you, whether you are a ministry leader or not, to begin thinking seriously about what it looks like to care for your soul. I will also feature some writing and resources from others, who can help guide us all in the process of growing spiritually stronger.

I haven't figured it all out yet. So, in the meantime, please pray for me and my family and all those who serve in the ministry of Jesus' church.