

Recognizing and Avoiding Burnout

When does a fire go out? If a fire is extinguished it will go out, but what if it is allowed to burn out on its own? If we continue to add fuel to the fire, it will burn; if there is no more fuel, the fire eventually goes out. This can also happen to people. One may reach a point where there is no energy left. Burnout is described as, “fatigue, frustration, or apathy resulting from prolonged stress, overwork, or intense activity” (dictionary.com). When burnout happens, joy in one’s work, calling, or other things that once brought happiness disappears. The mental and physical exhaustion can be so severe that one can no longer care for their needs or for the needs of those around them.

Life Has Many Demands

In most cases, burnout does not happen suddenly. Rather, it is the culmination of events over an extended period of time. Often burnout is associated with one’s work, and studies have shown that some individuals in certain professions or jobs are more susceptible to burnout. It seems though, that a student dealing with the demands of their studies, a mother at home with her children, the elderly, anyone could experience burnout or at times feel exhaustion with their calling. While burnout is often the end result, many may experience exhaustion or tiredness. When these arise we need to take steps to avoid burnout.

I have noticed when visiting with others how the topic of a busy life often comes up. We live in a busy time; we hurry, and many demands are placed on our time. Some of the demands are self-imposed and some are placed on us by others. Most people are busy, though we all are not busy with the same things. It would be good to consider if we are spending our time on what’s important.

“Large Stones”—the Important Things

At a recent congregational discussion, one brother shared this perspective, “Don’t ask me what my priorities are, but ask me how I spend my time.” It seems we find time for things we enjoy, and at times this can be at the expense of time for our spouse and families. We do have responsibilities for our family and in our work.

During this same evening the presenter related of a teacher who brought a large glass jar to class. He added large rocks to the jar and asked his students if it was full. They replied that it was, seeing the rocks to the top of the jar. He then added pebbles and shook the jar to settle what was now in it. The class acknowledged that the jar was now full. Next, he took fine sand and poured it into the jar. Sand filled the remaining pockets and gaps, but the jar did not overflow. Finally he added water to the jar.

The jar represents our life and the time we have. Let’s endeavor to put the large stones—the important things—into the jar first. If our time is filled with the little things, there is not room for what is truly important. Do we have time to pause before God’s Word? Have we “been there” for our spouse and family? Have we fulfilled our work responsibilities to the best of our abilities?

A Personal Responsibility

The songwriter describes the busy time we live and the struggle we may face in finding the appropriate balance: “With selfishness and hurry, how blinded we become. We scarcely even notice our dear ones’ needs at home” (SHZ 420:3). Our focus can easily be inward and at times we place too much emphasis on that with which we are personally busy. We can be oblivious to the needs of our spouse or children. Not long ago, as I was headed out the door after quickly eating supper,

one of the children asked, “Do you have another meeting tonight, dad?” My son’s emphasis was on, “another.” There was a meeting that evening and I had committed to it at an earlier date. I left for the meeting torn, pondering, but needing to admit that I had not balanced the schedule so well.

If I consider my personal calendar, the individual items are doable. The challenge and difficulty come with the number of items crammed into a certain time period. As I’m apt to do, have I also forgotten about the home calendar and expectations? “One more thing” is often easy to agree to, but when the requests are from many directions, the cumulative effect can be too much. Exhaustion can be close and patience wears thin. We need to watch, and even guard our calendars; nobody else will. To avoid burnout, we also need to be able to say no.

God’s Word Teaches

We can also support and respect others’ time when they say they are unable to do a certain task. Luther in his explanation of the Eighth Commandment reminds us to, “put the best construction on all [our neighbor] does.”

Jesus was visiting in a familiar home. Mary was visiting with Jesus, and Martha was busy preparing the meal and hosting their guests. She asked Jesus to tell Mary to help with her duties. Martha felt overwhelmed with her duties and wanted help. She became frustrated with Mary and felt that her sister was neglecting important duties.

We, too, can feel like Martha, busy and consumed with our obligations, and an answer of “no” to a request we have may not be taken graciously. Remember that the person we have asked may already be feeling guilty because they need to decline our request. Martha was doing important work; she was serving the believers. Jesus reminded Martha, “Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41,42). We, too, must remember that personally hearing God’s Word is most important.

Freedom and Love in God’s Kingdom

God has placed good gifts to accomplish the work of His kingdom, but this work can create added burden and pressure as it is mostly done by willing servants outside of their daily calling and responsibilities. Family and personal time is challenged as this work goes forward. We want to freely serve when we are asked yet may feel timid if the request feels overwhelming or seems like too much at a certain time in life. May we always feel the freedom and love to say if some request is too much.

God has not given all the gifts to just a few people. Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthian believers reminds, “Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:4). In the work of the kingdom, we should try to find those who are not yet involved and spread the workload. It is a blessing to be involved in the work, but the joy can be lost if one is exhausted. Burnt-out workers cannot serve effectively; the work suffers and the individuals are hurt. We also can consider the level of activity in our congregation. Fundraising and building projects also take many workers and countless hours on top of services, Sunday school, Bible Class, and the other activities. May we all remember that the foremost function of all the activities is that we have the opportunities to hear God’s Word.

We also need to listen to others around us. With the demands and pressures that we feel, we may not even understand or acknowledge our exhaustion. We may feel the need to put additional time or energy into a task, when we have already reached a personal limit. We may not understand where we are actually, but others looking in can see it. Our spouse may see it; our children may notice it. If we are consumed with our obligations and the pressure of this has been felt for a long

time, this is noticed at home. Coworkers might see the situation more clearly than we do. If others, out of genuine concern for us and our well-being visit about our situation, it is good to listen.

God Promises His Care

The songwriter who so aptly describes our time and the difficulty we feel in fitting everything in, encourages us, “But then we pray, dear Father, and share our stress and burden within the care of Christ” (SHZ 420:3). We can pray when we feel like we can’t keep up with all the demands. We can freely share our stress and burden with close ones, our families, and dear brothers and sisters in faith. God knows the phase of life we are in, the struggles we are experiencing. He knows the exhausted one, the one who has had to personally take a break from their obligations, and those who support and help when burnout has happened. God has promised to care for us. When demands and challenges strain and break the love and when offenses come, we have the best care when the gospel is preached.

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Discussion Items

1. What are the “big stones” in your life? What is the gravel or sand that consumes your time?
2. Are the things that keep you busy the things that are most important to you?
3. Does today’s technological age, including social media, present additional challenges in prioritizing our time? What are these challenges?
4. Sing song of Zion #420 and discuss it with your family.

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