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The Biblical Imperative for Pastoral Self-Care

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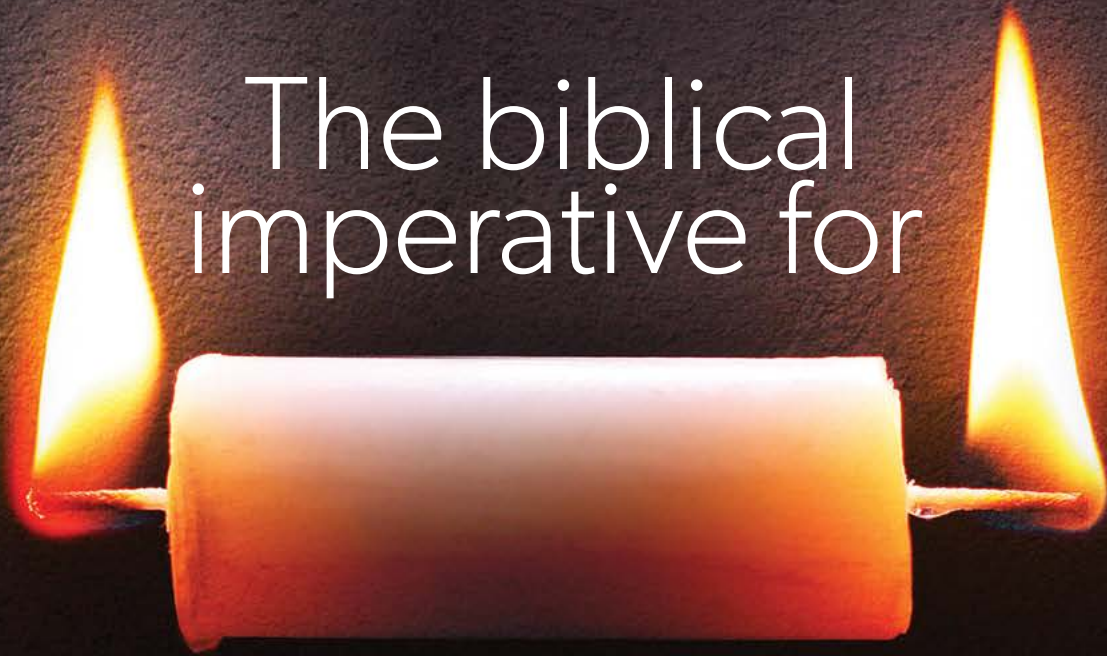
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SCAN FOR AUDIO

The biblical imperative for



pastoral self-care

After a routine wellness check at his doctor's office, Pastor John¹ counseled a troubled couple at his home. While John was in the counseling session, his doctor called his wife at work and said, "Listen, make sure that John gets to the hospital as soon as possible. I tried to call him, but there was no answer."

John described what happened next. "My wife left work and came home. The couple was still sitting there, talking, and I was trying to help them. Physically, I wasn't feeling well. At some point, my wife said, 'Excuse me, he has to get to the hospital as soon as possible.' I argued with her, saying no, but she said, 'No, no, no, he has to go to the hospital,' and she shut the meeting down. I was admitted for five days. I was very sick."

You may be experiencing difficulties yourself, perhaps to the point of needing hospitalization, or you may be in significant emotional distress, yet you, the pastor, feel you must carry on. You do "your duty" instead of taking care of your most basic needs. Even when counseled by your spouse or a close friend to take a break, you continue to work, even overwork.

What does the Bible say about that? Here are a couple of verses: "But Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'What you're doing is no good. You will surely wear yourself out, as well as these people who are with you, because the task is too heavy for you. You cannot do it alone, by yourself'" (Exod. 18:17, 18, TLV). "And he said to them, '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 6:31, ESV).

The duty to self-care

The Old and New Testaments both provide admonitions about self-care. Being worn out is not good. Having no leisure time away is not good. Burning out is not good. In contrast, loving yourself and caring for yourself is not only good but also vitally connected to obeying God's call.

In fact, in our study of pastoral stress in the North American Division,² we found that engaging in self-care was crucial to the well-being of pastors. But we also discovered that pastors

experienced many barriers to engaging in self-care.³ These barriers can be internal, such as pastoral expectations of themselves, or external, coming from church members or church administrators.

"Our job is never done," one pastor said. "And so, this creates a situation where we sometimes have trouble convincing ourselves that we've done a great job, or we've done enough."

Church members' expectations also create barriers for pastors to take care of their own needs. Members may expect your family's needs to be secondary to theirs. Also, there may not be enough hours in the week to handle all your responsibilities and still find enough time to spend with your family. This lack of work-life balance brings more stress and then becomes a vicious cycle of guilt for not meeting either congregational or family needs.

One study participant shared his experience with neglecting self-care because of church members' expectations. "There is an expectation that the laity have of the pastor, and I think sometimes the leadership perpetuates it in a way that says, the pastor is supposed to run the programs. As a result of that, laity says, 'That is what we pay you for, that is why we pay tithe. It is your job to do evangelism. It is your job to do the visits. It is your job to make the phone calls, it is your job to be the chairman of this, that and the other, because that is what we pay you for.' And I hope the new generation of pastors pay attention to that. Some of us older generation of pastors did not. And we ended up losing our families. We ended up having children who are bitter towards the church and we ended up having wives who don't want to be married to pastors anymore because they don't know that guy. That is not the person they married. That person was never home and when they are home, they were too tired, they couldn't interact because the pastor became everything to everybody."⁴

Another type of barrier to self-care, alluded to above, is the pressure from conference administrators about job expectations. One study participant shared: "As a young pastor you quickly learn you're rewarded for doing, not being.

And so, the minute you wake up, the pressure to accomplish, to do some measurable tasks that the conference would acknowledge that you were actually doing your job, is tremendous. It takes a lot of self-discipline to say ‘Forget that. I’m going to walk with God and I’m going to spend the morning with Him or several hours with Him’ because the pressure is intense. You got to be out to visit them, you got to do Bible studies, and you got funds to raise. The list is obnoxiously long. And so, there is a lot of pressure.”⁵

Importance of self-care

But remember: burning the candle at both ends comes with a high price. The consequences may include burnout, depression, lack of motivation, irritability, and marital problems. One study revealed that, in the United States, burnout results in approximately 120,000 deaths each year.⁶ Conversely, research notes that engaging in self-care is associated with reducing heart disease, stroke, and cancer.⁷ Most important, self-care works to keep us in tune with God and His purpose for our lives.⁸ Thus, it is not an overstatement to declare that practicing self-care may save your life now and for eternity.

In the book *Mending Ministers*, Pastor Phil shares his story of how his personality, along with his innate sense of pastoral care, called him to take care of others: “Helping navigate life challenges, encouraging life changes, and facilitating people’s personal journey with Jesus have been deeply fulfilling. Sadly, for many years I did that at the expense of my own personal well-being. . . . I’ve paid the price. Through the years I became more sedentary resulting in significant weight gain. . . . My health was a mess, and I was a heart attack waiting to happen.”⁹

Recovery was not easy. It took more than one attempt and more than one approach to get more balanced. He finally realized that it was about taking care of himself first. “The paradigm shift I’ve had to make is that if I’m going to be serious about caring for others, I must be serious about taking care of myself first.”¹⁰ Spiritual care and physical care go hand in hand. In other words, “Total self-care is essential for pastoral leaders if they are to be effective caregivers for others.”¹¹

Developing a self-care plan

If you decide to start taking care of yourself, the next question is, What, exactly, is *self-care*? In its simplest form, the term *self-care* means, of course, caring for yourself. Hence, self-care

includes any activity—physical, mental, social, or spiritual—that optimizes your health. In addition to days off and annual vacation, the following list of daily activities may enhance your quality of life and improve your work performance:

1. *Learn to say no.* For those of us who grew up thinking that we needed to say yes, saying no becomes difficult. Realize that no is a complete sentence. “No.” You do not need to explain, apologize, or feel guilty. You have every right to make decisions about what you will not do.

2. *Soften your no.* Try using a “but” in your answer. For example, “I would love to help plan the church’s camping trip next weekend, *but* I made a commitment not to take on any new responsibilities this month.”

3. *Try, “That does not fit (or work) for me right now.”* It may sound something like, “I hear you would prefer to set church board meetings for all day Sunday, but that does not fit for me with my home duties.” It is still a no but in a softer form.

4. *Get enough sleep.* An adequate amount of sleep is a biological necessity for our physical and mental well-being. Most adults need seven to nine hours of quality sleep each night. Furthermore, to function at optimal levels, you need to rest, repair, and recover from daily stress on the mind and body, and a good night’s sleep will do just that. A few suggestions to help make that happen include (1) setting a regular, early bedtime; (2) making your bedroom as dark as possible, especially eliminating ambient light from electronics; (3) avoiding sleep-depriving substances, such as caffeine; and most important, (4) letting go of emotional stress and worry at the end of the day. Scripture reminds us to “cast all your care upon Him, because He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7, MEV). This will set us up for better, deeper sleep.

5. *Get regular physical exercise.* Getting the body moving will increase your circulation; boost your energy, mood, and cognition; reduce stress; and improve performance. Suffice it to say, regular exercise and sustained productivity are closely linked. Get moving!

6. *Eat healthfully.* Your food is your fuel; hence, eating a healthy, balanced diet is essential for maintaining vibrant health and can help you feel more energized. Just as a car runs best with the type of gas the manufacturer recommends, your body needs the right kind of food to perform at its best.

7. *Practice daily gratitude.* Practicing gratitude frequently will help you develop positive

emotions, resulting in better sleep and more drive during the day. So, find two to three things that you are grateful for each day, verbalize them or record them in a gratitude journal, and watch how it positively impacts your mood and well-being.

8. *Laugh often.* When it comes to relieving stress, more giggles are just what the doctor ordered. As a matter of fact, “a merry heart doeth good like a medicine” (Prov. 17:22, KJV). Furthermore, when you start to laugh, it lightens your load mentally. It also induces physical changes in your body, soothes tension, relieves pain, and improves your mood.

Now is the time

Pastoral self-care is not rocket science. It reflects one’s values and philosophy. Often it is caught rather than taught. But it can be a matter of life and death, in a major way. Consider finding a pastor to act as your mentor and model and keep you accountable. Are you ready to enter into the joy of our Lord? God is calling you to act right away. Start taking care of yourself, for it is, in the end, the best way to fulfill your ministerial responsibilities.



- 1 We use pseudonyms exclusively in referring to our research participants throughout this article.
- 2 René Drumm and Petr Činčala, “SDA Pastor Health Qualitative Study Report: What Can and Must Be Done to Save the Health of Adventist Pastors” (unpublished report, North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Department, 2021).
- 3 René Drumm, Petr Činčala, and Ivan Williams, “It Takes a Lot of Discipline to Say, ‘I’m Going to Walk With God Today’: Recognizing and Addressing Barriers to Pastors’ Spiritual Wellbeing” (Adventist Human Subject Research Association Conference, Orlando, FL, May 2022).
- 4 David Sedlacek, Duane McBride, René Drumm, Alina M Baltazar, Romulus Chelbegean, Gary Hopkins, Elaine Oliver, and Wendy Thompson, “Seminary Training, Role Demands, Family Stressors, and Strategies for Alleviation of Stressors in Pastors’ Families” (unpublished report, North American Division Ministerial and Family Ministries Departments in conjunction with the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2014).
- 5 Sedlacek et al., “Seminary Training.”
- 6 Jennifer Moss, “Burnout Is About Your Workplace, Not Your People,” *Harvard Business Review*, December 11, 2019, <http://hbr.org/2019/12/burnout-is-about-your-workplace-not-your-people>.
- 7 Matthew Glowiak, “What Is Self-Care and Why Is It Important for You?” Southern New Hampshire University, April 14, 2020, <https://www.snhu.edu/about-us/newsroom/health/what-is-self-care>.
- 8 Glowiak.
- 9 Ivan Williams, Petr Činčala, and René Drumm, *Mending Ministers on Their Wellness Journey* (Lincoln, NE: AdventSource, 2022), 107.
- 10 Williams, Činčala, and Drumm, 108.
- 11 Williams, Činčala, and Drumm, 108.

10 DAYS OF PRAYER

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