

## *The Cure for Burnout*

So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)  
Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. (Ephesians 6:7)

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Summer is a busy season around this place. Visitors come to Block Island to relax, but for those of us who live here year-round, summer is hectic. We all get tired. Even in church we get tired—between the fair and the quilt raffle and the CROP walk and Vacation Bible School, all within two weeks. No wonder some people are too tired to come to Bible study or Soup and Song.

Every church I've been in—and I suppose every church, period—talks about volunteers burning out. There are always people who used to be very active, helping with everything, but now they are “burned out,” like a log fire that once flamed brightly but now is just a pile of ash. No point in holding a match to it. You won't get any response.

I was warned about burnout again this week in the context of a very small church duty: getting people to bring cookies and prepare the coffee for coffee hour. Of course, it's not really that the cookies are too much for someone to do: it's the whole history of everything the church has ever asked them to do, as if they are keeping a running tab. And on this island, it's the sum total of everything every nonprofit has ever asked me to do as a volunteer.

There are several sermons I could give on this topic which I will *not* give this morning, not least because this is a Communion Sunday and you don't need a long sermon. I could give a sermon on how we are one body with many parts and we all have to do our functions. I could give a sermon on the Sabbath and how we all need to get enough rest and establish boundaries. I could give a sermon on the servants who were given talents by their master and expected to use them rather than put them in the ground. In fact, I *have* given all those sermons before. But I want to focus on another discovery I've made.

There *are* some people that never seem to burn out. How can that be? I don't think it's just genetics that allows some people to continue serving through a lifetime. There are some people who keep on doing the dirty work even when no one is there to watch or to pat them on the back. There are some people who don't give up when they don't have many people show up for an event or when nobody thanks them for all the work they did. Maybe it has something to do with their temperament, but after years of observation I've concluded that it has more to do with their theology. The people who work hard are almost always those who see their activity in a theological framework, the ones who see their faith in Christ as an important driver in their everyday life. Some people might call them conservative because they still care about things like Bible study and prayer, but I don't think “conservative” has anything to do with making them the energizer bunnies of the church. It's the reason they have for doing what they do.

I think there *is* a cure for burnout. The cure is to reframe what you are doing so that you see the task in terms of your relationship to God. Dr. Steve's prescription is to take two verses and call me in the morning. They are the two verses printed in the bulletin, which give us two basic principles of Christian ethics. The first is “Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31); the second is “Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people” (Ephesians 6:7). The question these verses make us ask in terms of volunteer work in the church is “Who are you doing this work *for*?”

If you think you are doing the work for Harbor Church, you're going to burn out. Loyalty to the institution can only take you so far. Besides, if you think you are doing it for the organization, you are bound to start asking whether everybody else in the organization is doing as much as you are. Why should you be asked to do more than your fair share? Why should you give any more than the average of the membership? You start feeling that anything more than that means that someone is taking advantage of you—either the leadership is, or the lazy members are. It's just not fair.

People who don't burn out don't think of themselves doing the church a favor, or doing the pastor a favor; they don't even see themselves doing their duties as responsible members. They think of themselves doing it for God. They are not doing all those menial tasks or those leadership tasks for *you*; they are doing them for Jesus. Honestly, I wouldn't keep doing this every week just for a paycheck. It's not worth it. I wouldn't keep doing it because I want your praise, or because the church needs me, or even because I care about you. The only reason I keep at this is that I'm doing it for Jesus. He's the one I'm working for, and I never get disillusioned with him the way I get disillusioned with you. He has never disappointed me, and he never asks me to do anything he doesn't give me the strength to do.

The two verses I am highlighting come in strange contexts for our day. The first one, about doing everything for the glory of God, comes at the end of a discussion about whether church members should buy meat from the butcher that had previously been offered as a sacrifice in a pagan temple. Paul's answer is that the underlying principle for all the apparently minor ethical decisions in life is this: Will this course of action bring glory to God or not? The second verse, about doing your work as though you were working for Jesus, comes in a section of advice to slaves, telling them that in the end their work is not for their earthly master but for their heavenly one—that their masters are accountable as they are to Jesus some day, and that their enthusiasm for work should be based less on their feelings about their masters and more on their feelings about Jesus. You could dismiss both those sections of the New Testament as irrelevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but I think the ethical principles there are universal and hold a secret to the joyful Christian life.

The idea of living for the glory of God is not a random idea that Paul just dropped into 1 Corinthians. It is a basic idea that runs through the Bible. God created us for his glory and he saved us for his glory. God's ultimate purpose in saving us – in sending Jesus to die for us – was not to save us; our salvation is a means to an end. The ultimate purpose is that God would be glorified, that God would receive glory through our loving and enjoying his perfection seen in his grace and mercy. It's shocking to modern people to say that God doesn't exist for our sakes, that his main goal in life is not to take care of us. God exists for himself. He existed happily before he ever created us, but he chose to create us and save us to extend his glory, to share his glory with us and to be glorified through our joy in him. The first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks "What is the chief end of man?" The answer is, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever."

How do we glorify God? We glorify him when we praise him, but we also glorify him when we cause others to praise God. How do we cause others to praise God? We do it when we demonstrate God's love in a way that makes people see how good God is. What is our motive for doing good deeds? Is it to prove that we are good people? Is it to add to the sum total of kindness in the world? Jesus had another idea you may remember from the Sermon on the Mount: (Matthew 5:16 NRSV) "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." 1 Peter 2:12 (NIV) says "Live such good lives among

the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God."

The bottom line is that we care more about God's reputation than our own. We're not in it for brownie points or stars in our crown. We're in it because what we do with our lives makes people think better of God and makes them more likely to love Jesus. Jesus said to the Pharisees that they cared more about the glory that comes from people than the glory that comes from God. But we ought to care more about what people think about God than what they think about us. Would you choose a course of action that made people think less of you but think better of God? Of course Jesus answered that question yes, yes, all the way to the cross.

Johann Sebastian Bach—whose work we are hearing played today—carved the words *Soli Deo Gloria* on his organ at Leipzig to remind him that all his music should be composed and performed for the glory of God. That's why the initials SDG appear at the end of his compositions. It's not the initials of the composer. It means "to God alone be the glory!" Sometimes today we see stars win awards on TV and say "All glory to God," or we see a baseball player point to heaven when he gets a home run. I can't judge if they are sincere or not, but the sentiment is right. Paul would just add: if God is glorified by my striking out or by my losing the award competition, I am happy to see God glorified, whatever happens to my reputation. It is entirely possible that God is more glorified in a disaster than in a triumph.

This week during the Olympic coverage I've heard them play the theme from *Chariots of Fire*, perhaps the ultimate Olympics movie. Eric Liddel knew that he had a God-given gift of running. He said, "When I run, I feel God's pleasure." But running was not the purpose of his life; his purpose was to glorify God. In the Paris Olympics, when a race was scheduled on Sunday, he dropped out even though he was the favorite. Why? Because he thought it would dishonor God for him to disobey God's commandment. And when the Olympics games were over, Eric did not become a sportswriter. He became a missionary to China and eventually died there, because he felt that the way to bring the most glory to God was to tell people in other countries that Jesus died for them.

But it's the second of my two verses that grabs me the most—perhaps because I'm a Baptist rather than a Presbyterian. The glory of God still feels a little abstract, but the principle of doing my work not for you but for Jesus is personal. That's not a verse for pastors, mind you. Paul is saying it to slaves, of all people. If you're a grunt working in a hot kitchen in a Block Island restaurant and living in sub-par employee housing, get yourself in the frame of mind that says you are working not for the Man but for Jesus. Jesus called you to serve him in that kitchen. If you are teaching school or managing investments or renting houses—whatever you are doing—see yourself doing that job for Jesus. If you can't see that, you probably need a different job.

It's easy when you are doing tasks for the church. It's not hard to imagine that Jesus asked you to help those kids in Vacation Bible School. It's not a stretch that Jesus would ask you to wash feet or dishes or floors. It's easy to hear Jesus asking you to pick up that old lady or bring food to the funeral. Even when you're sitting in a Trustees Meeting, as some of you will this week, remember that you're not just doing your duty as a church member; you're not even doing it because the church building is important for its own sake; you are doing that work for Jesus.

I want to close with a song I grew up with but haven't heard in years. It's called "To the Work." It's revealing, I think, that if you look in old hymnals you find quite a few songs about working for Jesus, about doing your best and asking to be a channel of blessing. Those songs

didn't make the cut in today's hymnals, which are full of songs about glorifying God but none about glorifying God by working. You get the impression that the Christian life is all about singing and trusting but never doing. But Fanny Crosby, that great hymn writer who gave us *Blessed Assurance* and *All the Way My Savior Leads Me*, among many others, was not embarrassed at all to urge people to get to work. "To the work! To the work! We are servants of God, let us follow the path that our Master has trod; with the balm of his counsel our strength to renew, let us do with our might what our hands find to do." Then she had the nerve to add a chorus that says, "Toiling on, toiling on, toiling on, toiling on." An honest soul! That's what the Christian life involves: toiling on but never burning out because you know the point of it all is to serve Jesus and bring glory to God.