

BURNOUT & RENEWAL *with Jeremy Pate*

LESSON ONE: INTRODUCTION

The term “burnout” was first coined in 1974 by Herbert Freudenberger, in his book, “Burnout: The High Cost of Achievement.” The original definition was, “the extinction of motivation or incentive, especially when one’s devotion to a cause or relationship fails to produce the desired results.”

DEFINITIONS for BURNOUT:

- Fatigue, frustration, or apathy resulting from prolonged stress, overwork, or intense activity
- Physical or mental collapse caused by overwork or stress
- A state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed, emotionally drained, and unable to meet constant demands.
- Syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, characterized by feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one’s job or feeling negatively toward one’s career, and reduced professional productivity (recently updated definition by World Health Organization, classifying it as a medical condition; an occupational phenomenon)
- Job burnout is a special type of work-related stress - a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity

SYNONYMS:

- Clinical depression
- Collapse
- Crackup
- Emotional collapse
- Nervous exhaustion
- Neurosis
- Shattered nerves

Would you add anything to these definitions/synonyms, based on your experience?

SYMPTOMS:

- Have you become cynical or critical?
- Do you drag yourself to _____ and have trouble getting started?
- Have you become irritable or impatient?
- Do you lack energy and productivity?
- Are you mentally and physically exhausted?
- Are you moody or short-tempered?
- Do you lack concentration?
- Are you unsatisfied?
- Do you feel unappreciated?
- Are you disillusioned?
- Are you struggling with feelings of inadequacy?
- Are you self-medicating?
- Have your sleep habits changed?
- Are you having unexplained physical problems (headaches, stomach/bowel problems, etc.)?

Would you add anything to this, based on your experiences?

10 OCCUPATIONS WITH HIGH BURNOUT RATES:

1. Physician
2. Nurse
3. Social Worker
4. Teacher
5. School Principal
6. Attorney
7. Police Officer
8. Public Accounting
9. Fast Food
10. Retail

A recent Gallup poll shows that nearly 2/3 of all full-time workers are dealing with burnout at some point while at work.

Experts estimate that burnout translates into a loss of anywhere from \$150 to \$350 billion annually for U.S. businesses.

What would you add to this list? Why? Should there be a special section for "Disciples of Christ"? I can assure you that "Ministry" should be on this list!

Let's take a look at how this has been explained/perceived by others:

QUOTES:

- "Burnout is not about giving too much of yourself; it's about trying to give what you do not possess."
- "Burnout is nature's way of telling you, you've been going through the motions."

- “Burnout often has as much boredom in it as exhaustion.”
- “While burnout obviously has something to do with stress...one of the deepest contributors to burnout...is the deep disappointment of not living up to your true calling, which is to help.”
- “Burnout is the result of too much energy output and not enough energy self-invested. In other words, it’s burning more fuel than you’ve put in your tank.”
- “Burnout happens, not because we’re trying to solve problems, but because we’re trying to solve the same problem over and over and over.”
- “Burnout occurs when your body and mind can no longer keep up with the tasks you demand of them.”
- “The moments of silence are gone. We run from them into the rush of unimportant things, so filled is the quiet with the painful whispers of all that goes unspoken. Busy-ness is our drug of choice, numbing our minds just enough to keep us from dwelling on all that we fear we can’t change. A compilation of coping mechanisms, we have become our fatigue. Unwilling or unable to cut ourselves free of this modern machine we have built, we’re dragged in its wake all too quickly toward our end.”
- “Never overestimate the strength of the torchbearer’s arm, for even the strongest arms grow weary.”
- “Burnout at its deepest level is not the result of some train wreck of examinations, long call shifts, or poor clinical evaluations. It is the sum total of hundreds and thousands of tiny betrayals of purpose, each one so minute that it hardly attracts notice.”
- “Hello? Do you see me? I’m working as creatively as possible and you want more and more and I’m out of juice, and if you send me one more email I’m going to walk into the ocean and swallow water.”
- “Burnout...has been described as trying to run a marathon at full speed. It’s often the mothers who care the most who are the most prone to burnout.”

I was assigned this topic months ago, and it has been in my mind (in one way or another) since then. I have turned it over from so many different angles, and I’m still not sure that I’m ready to teach it, because I’m still living with it. I—like most people in this class—have been “burned out,” and I have also been “renewed”. In fact, this has happened multiple times over the course of my life.

This truth of life drew me back to Ecclesiastes...

In many ways, the book of Ecclesiastes was written from the perspective of someone who experienced several different kinds of burnout, and ultimately found true renewal in his relationship with God. I suppose we could turn to a number of relevant passages as we introduce our class this morning, but I would like to turn our attention to chapter 3:1-8.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

I’d like to focus for just a moment on a few phrases used in this section of Scripture:

- **“a time to break down”** - One commentator says that it “was a frequent occurrence for ancient people who had to break down existing structures in order to build new ones. Pertinent questions must have been asked: ‘Is this structure salvageable?’ ; ‘Is it worth keeping?’ It would be a foolish waste of money and energy to tear down a house or building that is still strong and functional. However, sometimes a structure is no longer

worth keeping and must be dismantled” (Truth for Today, p. 69). I simply want to plant the seed of a question for next week: Does/could burnout play a role in this?

- **“and a time to build up”** - Does this seem related to the concept of “renewal”? This concept is laid side-by-side with the idea of breaking/tearing something down, and it is a well-used theme in Scripture when it comes to spiritual growth and rejuvenation. If we never got burned out, could we ever be renewed, refreshed, or restored?
- **“a time to weep”** - There are no prescribed events mentioned here for which we have God’s approval to weep. In fact, when Paul echoes this sentiment in Romans 12:15, there are no qualifications mentioned. What makes ME weep might not make YOU weep; but the truth remains: there is a time in all of our lives when this is what seems appropriate. Maybe one of those times in your life has been a time of burnout.
- **“a time to laugh”** - There is also the opposite side of this: a time to renew our joy and delight for life. If we were meant to be happy all of the time, this passage would not make sense.
- **“a time to cast away stones”** - Read from p. 70 of *Truth for Today*
- **“a time to gather stones together”** - What kinds of life experiences might lead us to either of these decisions? These phrases seem to contain a relational component, which can be an interesting sub-category within our topic. Is it possible that some kind of burnout might play a role in these two concepts?

Continue through the passage, noticing how these phrases might include (in some cases, necessarily) the idea of burnout and renewal. It seems to be the writer’s intent to honestly encapsulate the many facets of the human condition, which might normalize our concept of burnout as something that everyone will eventually face.

One thing I can tell you, as a matter of fact (after researching/studying for this class), is that burnout is quite common, and seems to be a growing problem. Obviously, Christians are still human beings, so we are not going to be immune to something simply because we follow Christ.

Our world is getting busier, and we—for the most part—have been swept up in this wave of busy-ness. But before we decry the busy-ness of our culture, let me quote a modern writer who sees a difference in busy-ness and something more serious...

“[T]here is a world of difference between being busy and being hurried. Being busy is an outward condition, a condition of the body. It occurs when we have many things to do. Busy-ness is inevitable in modern culture. If you are alive today in North America, you are a busy person. There are limits to how much busy-ness we can tolerate, so we wisely find ways to slow down whenever we can. We take vacations, we sit in a La-Z-Boy® with a good book, we enjoy a leisurely meal with friends. By itself, busy-ness is not lethal. Being hurried is an inner condition, a condition of the soul. It means to be so preoccupied with myself and my life that I am unable to be fully present with God, with myself, and with other people. I am unable to occupy this present moment. Busy-ness migrates to hurry when we let it squeeze God out of our lives. Note the differences between the two: Busy. Hurried. A full schedule. Preoccupied. Many activities. Unable to be fully present. An outward condition. An inner condition of the soul. Physically demanding. Spiritually draining. Reminds me I need God. Causes me to be unavailable to God. I cannot live in the kingdom of God with a hurried soul. I cannot rest in God with a hurried soul...Jesus was often busy, but never hurried.”

— John Ortberg, [Soul Keeping: Caring For the Most Important Part of You](#)

“Repeatedly in the book of Leviticus, Israel is told that if people do not properly observe the Sabbath, or Passover, or if they profane what is holy, or despise the commandments, “. . . such persons must be cut off from their people.” That may seem harsh, but an unhealthy soul is like a cancer in the community. I care for my soul because if it becomes unhealthy, it will infect others.”

— **John Ortberg**, [Soul Keeping: Caring For the Most Important Part of You](#)

Not only is our culture busier than ever, but we are sicker than ever, and less satisfied than ever. We are simultaneously more connected and more disconnected than we have ever been. Why? Let’s observe another thought from Ortberg’s book:

“Despite the rise of the mental health profession, people are becoming increasingly vulnerable to depression. Why? Martin Seligman, a brilliant psychologist with no religious ax to grind, has a theory that it’s because we have replaced church, faith, and community with a tiny little unit that cannot bear the weight of meaning. That’s the self. We’re all about the self. We revolve our lives around ourselves. Ironically, the more obsessed we are with our selves, the more we neglect our souls. All of our language reflects this. If you’re empty, you need to fulfill yourself. If you’re stressed, learn how to take care of yourself. If you’re on a job interview, you have to believe in yourself. If you’re at the tattoo parlor, you must learn to express yourself. If someone dares to criticize you, you have to love yourself. If you’re not getting your own way, you have to stand up for yourself. What should you do on a date? You ought to be yourself. What if your self is a train wreck? What do you do then?”

— **John Ortberg**, [Soul Keeping: Caring For the Most Important Part of You](#)

“Gordon MacDonald once wrote about how what he called the “sinkhole syndrome” happens in a human life. It may be triggered by a failure at work, a severed relationship, harsh criticism from a parent, or for no apparent reason at all. But it feels like the earth has given way. It turns out, MacDonald wrote, that in a sense we have two worlds to manage: an outer world of career and possessions and social networks; and an inner world that is more spiritual in nature, where values are selected and character is formed — a place where worship and confession and humility can be practiced. Because our outer worlds are visible and measurable and expandable, they are easier to deal with. They demand our attention. “The result is that our private world is often cheated, neglected because it does not shout quite so loudly. It can be effectively ignored for large periods of time before it gives way to a sinkhole-like cave-in.” He quotes the haunting words of Oscar Wilde: “I was no longer captain of my own soul.” The sinkhole, says MacDonald, is the picture of spiritual vulnerability in our day.”

— **John Ortberg**, [Soul Keeping: Caring For the Most Important Part of You](#)

“A paradox of the soul is that it is incapable of satisfying itself, but it is also incapable of living without satisfaction.” — John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring For the Most Important Part of You*

DEFINITIONS FOR RENEWAL:

- To begin or take up again (as an acquaintance, a conversation, etc.)
- To make effective for an additional period
- To restore or replenish

SYNONYMS:

- Continue

- Extend
- Prolong
- Reaffirm
- Reestablish
- Reopen
- Restore
- Revive
- Exhilarate
- Freshen
- Overhaul
- Reawaken
- Recondition
- Recreate
- Regenerate
- Reinvigorate
- Repair
- Transform
- Resuscitate
- Replenish
- Revitalize
- Stimulate

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Based on all of these definitions/explanations, how many of us have experienced some kind of burnout? What about renewal?
- In what area(s) of life is this most prevalent for you?
- Do you believe that God can (and will) help you through your seasons of burnout, and lead you to times of renewal?
- What has been the most difficult thing that you've dealt with that might be associated with burnout?
- What brought you to this class? Why is this class different from other classes that you've attended? What do you hope to take from this class? Why does any of this matter?

DISCLAIMERS:

- This is not a psychology class. I am not a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a doctor, or a therapist. If you truly struggle with these kinds of issues related to burnout, you may need more than what this class can offer.
- I don't believe that this class will "fix" anything in your life (or my life); I do, however, believe that God's Word contains everything that we need to be "thoroughly equipped for every good work," and that the resources/tools that we need in order to conquer burnout are found within its pages. As we see in 2 Cor. 10:3-4, "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds."
- With God's help, along with some self-help, I truly believe that this class can help.
- "Dallas [Willard] once wrote about a tiny child who crept into his father's bedroom to sleep. In the dark, knowing his father was present was enough to take away his sense of aloneness. 'Is your face turned toward me, Father?' he would ask. 'Yes,' his father replied.

'My face is turned toward you.' Only then could the child go to sleep." — John Ortberg,
Soul Keeping

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