

YOUR PERSONAL LIFE

So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. – *1 Corinthians 10:31*

Much to the surprise of some church folks, pastors are people, too. We have personal lives that are not necessarily all bound up in the church. You have personal time, personal money, a home, your health and your spirit to take care of. If you don't, you and your church will both suffer.

Your Time

Your time belongs to God. That doesn't necessarily mean it belongs to the church. Being a workaholic is no more laudable for a pastor than for any other profession.

In my experience, there is always more work than time. One of the most important things you can learn is how to prioritize your time. It's not enough just to cut out the bad things you shouldn't do, or even the useless things that just waste your time. **The problem is all the good things you feel you should be doing** – or the people in your church feel you should be doing.

The ideal schedule

I was told in seminary that to truly write a good sermon, you should spend one hour in preparation for every minute the sermon will last. If you preach one thirty-minute sermon every week, that's thirty hours a week in sermon preparation.

Everyone knows the ideal pastor spends at least two hours a day in prayer, and two hours a day reading the Bible, and two hours a day reading theology and history and current events.

Since one of your main jobs is helping your people grow like Jesus, every pastor should meet with at least three people every day for an hour each. And of course, you should lead at least two or three Bible studies and classes each week – counting preparation time, that's another two hours a day.

But how can your church grow if you aren't out meeting and talking with people who don't know Jesus? Certainly you should spend at least an hour every morning and afternoon on the streets talking to people as they go and come from work, as well as lunchtimes, and all day Saturday.

Then there are all the administrative details of running a church. To do that properly requires at least two or three hours a day.

Of course, one of the main duties of a pastor is to visit the sick, and those in prison, and those who are grieving. Add three hours a day for this, at least.

We haven't even mentioned meetings, with your leaders, other pastors, community leaders or government officials, and so on. Let's say three meetings a week, two hours each when you include preparation.

Add all that up and it comes to a minimum of 168 hours a week that you, as a good pastor, should be spending on your job. And there are 168 hours in a week. Perfect!

Of course, that leaves exactly zero hours for your family, for recreation, and for minor details like eating and sleeping. But who needs all that stuff? You're Super-pastor!

The reality

If you try to keep that schedule you might last about three days before you completely fall apart. **It's impossible for any human being to do all the things many people believe a good pastor should do. And God doesn't expect you to.**

That means two things. First, learn to hear God's priorities. If you are hearing God right, he won't tell you to do more than he designed a normal human being to be able to do. Second, don't allow yourself to feel guilty over the things you don't get done. If you listen to God and obey his guidance, you'll do the things God wants you to do, and that's all that counts.

I love the story in John 11 of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, but probably not for the reason most people do. I love the first part.

Lazarus, good friend and financial supporter of Jesus, is deathly ill. His sisters send a messenger to Jesus. "Lazarus is dying, come quickly!"

As a good pastor, what is your immediate response? Drop everything, of course, and rush to his bedside. That's what everyone expects you to do. You need to be there to pray. You need to be there to comfort the family. You need to be there to make sure Lazarus is ready to pass into eternity. How could a good pastor do anything else?

But what did Jesus do? He stayed where he was for two more days. Then he spent at least a couple more days on the road. By the time he finally got to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead and in the tomb four days.

Of course, we all know how the story ends. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. But what I find so freeing about it is that **Jesus didn't do what everyone expected him to do.** Instead, he prayed and found out what God wanted him to do. Then he did that.

Please don't misunderstand. This is an extreme example. The lesson is not to ignore your people's needs. If you have an emergency in your church, your place is with your people unless God specifically tells you otherwise. What I do want you to learn is to stop and give God a chance to specifically tell you. Ask God what he wants you to do. **Let God dictate your schedule,** not the expectations of people, including yourself.

Time management

God won't give you more than you can handle, but God does want you to handle things effectively. One important way of doing that is learning to properly manage your time. There are many systems, and many books that explain them, and different ones work best for different people. After more than thirty years in ministry, I'm still refining my time management and trying new things. It's not important which system you use, as long as it works for you. What is important is that you **develop a systematic way of keeping track of what you need to do**, so you can efficiently and effectively get it done.

I have a tendency to underestimate how long it will take me to do things. That means it's easy for me to over-commit myself. Before I realized this, it seemed I was always rushing, and always stressed out over things I hadn't completed.

One day when I was feeling this the most, the Lord led me to a verse that at first seemed completely unrelated. In Ezekiel 44, God describes what the priests are to wear when they are ministering in the temple. Verse 18 says, they shall not bind themselves with anything that causes sweat.

What did a Hebrew priest's wardrobe have to do with me? But as I prayed, I began to see something. God was saying he doesn't want me to bind myself, to commit or obligate myself, to the point that I'm sweating over whether I can get everything done. In the Old Testament **God didn't want his priests coming into his presence all hot and sweaty**. He doesn't want it in the church either.^[i]

Pray through the day

One last word on the subject of your time. Martin Luther, father of the Protestant Reformation, reportedly said of his schedule one day, "I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."

The busier you are, the more important is your prayer time. You can't use prayer as an excuse for not doing other things, but you need to

use it as a preparation for them. Make a habit of mentally walking through each appointment and task of the day, holding it up before God for favor and blessing, asking for wisdom about priorities and preparation. You'll be amazed how much more smoothly your day will go. Time is like anything else: give the first fruits to God, and he will multiply it back to you.

Your day job

Not every church can afford to pay a pastor a full-time living wage. If you have an outside job, you owe your employer an honest day's work. You may be the only Christian your co-workers know. Your example will either draw people toward Jesus or push them away. Remember, you're not in the pulpit here. Your actions will speak louder than your words.

Your Home

You may own your own home. You may rent a house or apartment. You may live in a place the church owns or rents. You might even live in the church building. Wherever you live, **you need a place where you are not on the job.** "Pastor" is what you do, not who you are. You need a place where you can be who you are.

Policies and boundaries

When your church is your landlord, things can get complicated. When you are your church's landlord, things can get complicated. When the church has any involvement in your living situation, things can get complicated.

You can prevent a lot of complications if you **have clear policies, written down and agreed to ahead of time** by everyone involved. Who is responsible for getting the furnace repaired? Who has to buy a new oven if the old one breaks? Who picks it out? Who pays for it? Who decides when the walls need painted? Who decides what color? Who pays? If you have a clear policy about how to handle these things before something happens, it

will make things much smoother when a situation arises.

You also need to **establish some boundaries between your work and your private life**. Especially if you are married, there are certain things you need to decide about your home. How will you balance hospitality against your family's need for privacy? How will you decide which people you will invite to your home for church business and which ones you will ask to meet you somewhere else? How much warning will you give your spouse before you bring someone home for dinner?

Is your home also your office, or do you have a separate place for church work? If you have a separate place, what do you do in each location? Which resources and books and records do you keep where? You might decide to use your home for work that requires quiet and concentration, such as prayer and study and writing, and use the office for meeting with people and doing administrative work. You might decide to do everything except church services at home. Or you might decide you want to do all your church work at the office, and keep your home as a sanctuary for you and your family.

The right answers to these questions will be different for everyone. They depend on your family, your home and church facilities, how long it takes you to get from one to the other, and your own personality. **Prayerfully consider these questions**, talk them over with your spouse and children if you are so blessed, and make some clear decisions. If you don't, you may find yourself falling by accident into practices that add unneeded stress.

Spiritual cleansing

About thirty years ago the church I was serving was going through some difficult times. New people with new ideas were coming into the church. Long-time members were happy to have the new people, but not their new ideas. Church meetings became stressful, and sometimes angry. I tried to play peacemaker in the meetings, but when I went home I often found that I was carrying the negative atmosphere with me. The result was that if one of the children started crying or my wife Paula needed some help, I would snap back in anger or stomp out of the house. One time I even punched a hole in a

bedroom door with my fist!

As Paula and I talked and prayed about it one evening, we began to wonder if something spiritual was going on. We know that the devil tempts people into all kinds of evil desires and attitudes. We also know that the devil is a finite being. He has to delegate most of his dirty work to evil spirits or demons. 2 Timothy 1:7 mentions a spirit of fear. Could it be that I was being influenced by a spirit of anger? I knew I wasn't demon possessed. But **what if angry words at a meeting created a spiritual opening for angry spirits? And what if one of them attached itself to me?**

When I was a child I watched Popeye cartoons on television. When Popeye was trying to decide what to do, a little cartoon angel would appear on one shoulder, whispering in his ear, "Do the right thing." Then a little devil figure would jump on his other shoulder, whispering, "No! Do this wrong thing!" That's kind of how I pictured spirits of anger, or worry, or whatever.

If that was really what was happening, then according to Mark 16:17 I had the authority, in the name of Jesus Christ, to command that evil spirit to go away and leave us alone. Paula and I prayed, and decided to try it.

First we offered our house to God as a place set apart, a sanctuary where only things of God would be welcome. Then, with our children, we went through every room of the house, commanding all spiritual influences not of God to be gone in the name of Jesus, and inviting God's Holy Spirit to come fill the space (Luke 11:24-26). In the bedroom we prayed for a spirit of peace and rest, in the kitchen we prayed for health, in the living room for good fellowship and hospitality, and so on. We placed a dab of oil on the doorways to symbolize the presence of the Holy Spirit.

When we finished, we could already feel a difference. The house felt somehow brighter and more peaceful.

Having cleared ungodly spirits out of the house, now we needed to make sure we didn't accidentally allow any back in. We started doing what we called "cleansing." It's a **spiritual equivalent of washing your hands after visiting a sick person.**

Basically, whenever one of us returned home from being out, we stopped on the doorstep and said something like this: "In the name of Jesus Christ,

anything not of God must be gone and may not come in here. Holy Spirit, please fill me with your grace and be with us. Hallelujah!”

Decades later we still follow this practice. It has made a huge difference in making our home a sanctuary of peace and rest in the Lord. When traveling, we spiritually cleanse hotel rooms in the same way. Of course, on occasion I still forget. I’m not home long before Paula senses that something is wrong. She’ll ask me, “Did you remember to cleanse?” The difference is that real.

Whenever someone visits, after they leave we say a quick “cleansing” along the same lines, just in case something hitch-hiked into our house on them and stayed. (We never let our guests know we are going to do this.) Just to be on the safe side and so as not to be biased, we do that after anyone has visited, no matter who they are. We have even found it to be useful after a stressful telephone conversation, or after talking between ourselves about a difficult or painful situation in the church, or if we have watched something on television that introduces a negative atmosphere. Of course, we don’t purposely watch bad things, but sometimes just watching the news can do it.

Do we believe ungodly spirits jump on our shoulders every time we go out? No. But I’m not very good at recognizing when one has, just as I’m not good at knowing when I get something dirty on the bottom of my shoe. Spiritual cleansing is an easy thing to do, so we do it every time, just in case.

Some may say it’s all psychological. If you prefer to look at it that way, I don’t mind. However you understand it, **we have found these steps to be of great value in making our home a sanctuary from the stress and negativity of the world.** I encourage you to find a way to do the same.

Your Health

In casual conversation we often use the same language to refer to spiritual and psychological issues. In this section I need to be a little more precise.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Paul prays, *May your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again.* You know what your body is: the physical part of you that interacts with the physical world, through your muscles and your five senses. Your spirit interacts with God

and the spiritual realm, through prayer and spiritual discernment. What Paul calls your soul is the Greek word *psyche*, root of “psychology.” It includes your emotions, intellect, memory, imagination and so on. It’s how you interact with the realm of ideas and feelings.

The spirit, soul and body are three distinct parts of every human being, and we need to keep them all healthy.

When your body has a cold, your mind may have a hard time thinking. When your emotions are sad, your spirit may not feel like praying. Every part affects every other part.

I once heard a pastor talk about an experience he had just been through with his health. He mentioned how cars have gauges on their dashboard to report how they are doing: a fuel gauge, an oil pressure gauge, an engine temperature gauge, and so on. If all the gauges read within the acceptable range, then the car is in good shape.

This pastor said he had always believed that human beings have two gauges, a spiritual gauge that measures spiritual health, and a physical gauge that measures physical health. He worked hard at his relationship with God, and he worked hard at eating right and exercising, so he figured he was alright.

Then suddenly one day he had a total breakdown. After a long and slow recovery, he realized that there was a third gauge that he had overlooked: the emotional gauge. He learned that if we let our emotional reserves get too low, we lose our ability to deal with everyday situations. And he learned that replenishing your emotional reserves is like charging the battery in a car. If things are working right, the alternator in a car constantly recharges the battery as the car is driven. If the battery is allowed to drain, it can only be recharged slowly, using a “trickle charger” that trickles the electricity in a little at a time. In the same way, if you allow your emotional reserves to drain, they can only safely be charged slowly over time. He believes that the search for a quick jolt may explain why some pastors succumb to emotionally charged temptations.

As a pastor, you know about keeping up your spiritual life. There is plenty of advice available about how to stay physically healthy (although personally I must confess that I know it better than I do it). I would like to mention three

quick things that I have found helpful with regard to keeping your emotional tank full.

First, **recognize what fills you and what drains you.** Some people and activities fill you with energy. You feel better when you are finished than when you started. Others drain energy from you. You have to work yourself up to face them, and recover when they are over. There is nothing wrong with this; it happens to everyone. A big step toward staying healthy is to recognize these differences and account for them. Make a list of the energizers and drainers, both people and activities. Arrange them in your schedule so you don't have too many drainers back to back. Schedule some energizers in between, or at least time for rest and recovery.

Second, **get enough rest.** Contrary to what our workaholic culture would have us believe, resting is not an unspiritual waste of time. American theologian Richard Foster said, "Sometimes the most spiritual thing I can do is take a nap." God made resting one of the Ten Commandments. After six days of creating the universe God himself rested (Exodus 20:8-11). So don't feel guilty about resting. Make time for it. It can be a pretty spiritual thing to do.

Third, **make yourself happy.** Some years ago my wife Paula was feeling kind of down about some things that had happened. She didn't want to keep feeling that way, and she didn't want to go to an expensive counselor or therapist. So she invented something she calls "Happy Therapy." "Happy Therapy" goes like this:

Step 1: Find something that makes you happy.

Step 2: Do it!

(I asked Paula to review my manuscript for this book. At this point, she wrote in the margin, "It worked!")

Depression can be a sign of a physical problem that needs medical treatment. But often it's just a matter of needing an emotional recharge. Never feel guilty about taking time to make yourself happy. Happiness is just a sign that you are emotionally healthy enough to do good ministry.

You can't effectively serve God, your church or your people if you are not healthy – physically, emotionally, spiritually, and in your relationships.

Learn to rejoice in taking time for your health.

Your Money

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, said, “Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” At one time he was one of the best-selling authors in England, and consequently had one of the highest incomes, yet he died with little more than the clothes on his back – by his own choice. He consistently gave the rest away to those in need. He didn’t leave much behind, but imagine his treasures in heaven!

Tithing

In 1976 I graduated from the University of Virginia with a degree in Systems Engineering. Two years later I left a good job with a good salary and moved two thousand miles to go to seminary so I could become a pastor. I had a wife and a baby. I went from a situation where I was able to live comfortably and save some money, to a situation where I had to truly learn how to depend on God.

As is common in America, most of the young mothers in our community and in our church worked at jobs outside the home. Early on, Paula and I prayerfully decided on another course. For our family, what Paula could give to our children by staying home full time with them was more important than whatever we could have bought for them if she took a job. We have never regretted that decision. It may not be right for everyone, but it was right for us.^[ii]

Nonetheless, money was tight. Have you ever had to buy food for four teenage boys and a girl?

From the time we first got married we tithed our income. **We believed that if the Old Covenant required 10%, we who are in the New Covenant could not do less.** Our understanding of Malachi 3:10 was that the tithe is the threshold, the minimum requirement that opens the windows of blessing.

We faithfully tithed through two years as an engineer at Ford Motor

Company and three years in seminary. Then I became a pastor.

By this time we had two children. My income as a pastor was less than the official government poverty level. There reached a point when Paula and I started wondering whether we could afford to continue to tithe.

We recalled the old saying, "Time is money." I was putting all my time into the church and the ministry. Certainly that was worth something, we told each other. God knew our situation. Certainly he would accept my time in place of my money, wouldn't he?

We conveniently forgot that "time is money" is a quote, not from the Bible, but from Benjamin Franklin, the same person who said "God helps those who help themselves." God is not obligated to follow Ben Franklin's philosophies.

Anyway, we decided that instead of giving ten percent of my income to the church, the biblical tithe, we could cut it back to five percent.

We had thought we were in financial trouble before. Now the bottom completely dropped out. **It was only a few weeks before we decided we couldn't afford NOT to tithe.** So we started giving God his ten percent off the top once again, and somehow God rescued our finances. I didn't get a raise, we didn't receive some big gift, but somehow things got better.

That was over thirty years ago. We have never stopped tithing, and God has never stopped providing.

Actually, there was one other time when our personal finances got in very bad shape. We knew from experience that reducing our giving was not the answer. We decided to see what would happen if we increased our giving to God. After all, I had preached many times that you can't out-give God. So we increased our giving, and sure enough, it happened again: somehow, without any clear change that we could see, our financial situation cleared up. It's just like farming: **if you want a bigger harvest, you have to plant more seed.**

I'm sure you have heard many testimonies of God's faithfulness to those who tithe. I just want you to know that what I write here is not theory, but proven by personal experience. My financial security is not in a job or a bank account or a government program. My security is in the fact that I have put my faith in God, I have obeyed his commands, and I know he is faithful to fulfill his promises.

The question of **tithing to your local church can become confusing if you are the pastor**, especially if there is not a clear separation between your own money and the church's funds. What if you are the pastor of a brand-new church? Maybe it's not even really a church yet, just a group of Christian believers meeting together for fellowship and support and learning. You may be serving your church right now as a volunteer. You may even be paying the costs of the church out of your own pocket. How do you figure a tithe then?

You might be tempted to say, "I'm the pastor, any pay I get for pastoring comes from tithes and offerings, so if I tithe, am I not just tithing back to myself?" It may sound logical, but beware. It's just a short step to rationalizing accepting tithes from others, but not paying them yourself.

I don't want to be legalistic, and there are no hard and fast rules and definitions. But **for me personally, it's not really an offering to God if I retain control of it**. I believe it is very important, both for my personal spiritual health and for my pastoral example for my church, that there be no hint of a financial conflict of interest.

What I mean is this: it can be very tempting to find a way you can use your money for yourself but still call it a tithe. Make sure you give your tithe in a way that avoids this temptation. **No one should be able to accuse you of using God's money to benefit yourself**. If you control the church's money (which I do not recommend – see Chapter 17), give your tithe to a different ministry. If you have a group of leaders who oversee the money for your church, then you should tithe to the church. Be sure everyone understands that there are no strings attached. Your tithe should go into the same pot as all the other tithes and offerings, and be managed the same way.

It always amazes me how many people think pastors get rich from the offerings of their people, or from some kind of outside support. They may even think the pastor personally owns the church's property. There have always been people who sought worldly gain from religion, and the devil makes sure those are the stories the public hears. That's why your finances must be clear and above-board. I don't mean outsiders should have access to your personal financial records, but you should be able to answer legitimate

questions and defend yourself against false accusations, should it ever become necessary.

Your people will watch to see what you do with your money. We are not to parade our giving before people to show off how spiritual we are. But as pastors it is important that our people know we don't just talk about God's faithfulness, we stake our lives on it. A leader is one who goes first and shows the way. Your people pray because you pray, and showed them the way. They read the Bible because you read the Bible, and showed them the way. And many will only give to the church if you give to the church, and show them the way.

Tithing is a difficult concept for many people, but the basic question is very simple. Am I going to obey God and trust him to fulfill his promises, or not? **If I only do the things that make sense to my human intellect, where is faith?** Tithing as a means of getting out of financial trouble doesn't make sense to my brain. But it's what the Bible says, so I do it. I've never known anyone who tried tithing in faith who was not blessed by the experience.

Pastor, you cannot afford not to tithe. You can't afford it financially, you can't afford it professionally, and you certainly can't afford it spiritually. Exactly how you calculate your tithe is something you need to prayerfully take up with God. But as a pastor, you must demonstrate the power of faith. Tithe!

Saving

Some people feel that saving money, especially saving to provide for the needs of old age, shows a lack of faith in God to provide. But Proverbs 6:6-8 tells us to learn from the ants. They store up food in summer to tide them over in winter. Many other Bible passages recommend wisdom and prudence.

God is the source of our security, but he uses earthly means, including savings, as the channel to provide for us. Emergencies can happen to anyone, and old age happens to almost everyone. Unless God clearly instructs you otherwise, always save a portion of your income to provide for yourself and your family in an emergency, or after you are unable to continue working.

Spending

In some traditions pastors take a vow of poverty. In others, pastors feel they should follow extravagant habits to demonstrate the abundance of God's provision. Most are somewhere in between. It seems to me you raise the fewest questions when your standard of living is about the same as that of most of the people in your church, or perhaps a bit more conservative.

When it comes to specific spending, I have always tried to follow a very simple rule: **ask God what he wants me to do**. If I prayerfully believe God wants me to buy something, I buy it. If I don't believe he wants me to buy it, I don't. Being married, of course, I always seek my wife's confirmation on these decisions, especially if it's a decision on which my natural desires might bias my ability to hear clearly from God. Matthew 6:33 promises that if we always seek to please God, he will always take care of us.

Protecting your money

It's important to **have clear boundaries between your personal money and church finances**. This can be very difficult if you are starting a church out of your home. Even if your church has a building or other property, many people will assume it belongs to you as pastor. If someone suffers some form of injury or loss related to the church, they may use legal means to try to force you personally to make reparations.

There are two ways to protect yourself from this kind of liability. The first is to make sure the church has appropriate insurance. If coverage designed for churches is not available in your situation, something similar to what is used by other kinds of religious or non-profit organizations, such as schools, may work.

The second way to protect your personal finances from liability is to establish the church as a separate legal entity. In America this is done by a process called incorporation – the same process used to protect the owners of small businesses. If a corporation, including a church, is sued, normally only the assets of the corporation are liable for judgment. The personal

money and property of the pastor and other church leaders is protected. Look for something similar for your situation.

Your Sabbath

In American churches, people often joke that the pastor only works one hour a week – the length of many Sunday morning services. The reality, of course, is that one of the biggest problems for pastors is that they never stop working. We addressed this a little bit in the section on managing your time, but I'd like to look at it again from another perspective.

Jesus said, *The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people* (Mark 2:27). In context, his point was that we are not to be legalistic about keeping the Sabbath. If you are like me, that's not the main problem. Right now, what I want you to see from these words is that God gave us the Sabbath for our benefit. If we don't keep a regular Sabbath time, we hurt ourselves, physically and emotionally as well as spiritually.

Technically, the Sabbath is from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. That's the Jewish definition, and the Sabbath is a Jewish institution. In the early church, Christians started meeting on the first day of the week, which we call Sunday. They chose that day because it was the day of Jesus' resurrection. Most of the early Christians were Jews, and they continued to honor the Sabbath on Saturday. Then they met together on Sunday to celebrate "the Lord's Day." For most, this meeting was after work, since Sunday was just another working day in the early centuries of the church.

Many Christians of today think Sunday is the Sabbath, and if they try to follow the Sabbath rules at all, they apply them to Sunday. There is nothing wrong with resting and focusing on God on Sunday. It probably works very well for many people. But **for most pastors, Sunday is not a Sabbath of rest, it's a work day.**

Many pastors and church people haven't thought this through. If you consider Sunday your day of rest, that means you consider the other six days work days. If Sunday is actually a work day also, that means you don't have a day of rest. You are breaking the Fourth Commandment.

As New Testament Christians, we are no longer subject to the Old Testament law. That means we are not responsible for legalistically following Sabbath rules (Romans 14:5). But we still follow the Ten Commandments as basic principles, and Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. To my way of thinking, that means it is very important to God that you **regularly set aside one day every week for rest and reflection and special time with God**. Note that “rest and reflection” doesn’t mean “catching up on all the other things you didn’t get to through the week.”

God’s whole creation operates on rhythms. There’s a warm season and cold season, rainy season and dry season, day and night. Light and other forms of energy vibrate in a rhythm we call “frequencies.” Even the rocks are made up of atoms whose parts oscillate and vibrate in rhythms.

You are no different. You require a rhythm of work and rest. You can’t rest all the time, but neither can you work all the time. You need both.

In the modern world, work is not necessarily physical activity. Many people work hard with their minds while barely moving their bodies. In the same way, rest is not necessarily lack of movement.

You rest your body every night by sleeping, but you also need a day every week to **rest your body by doing something different with it**. If your job requires a lot of physical work, rest may be sitting in a chair. But if your job requires hours of sitting in a chair, rest may mean doing something physical.

For me, Fridays are my “day off.” That’s when I spend time with my family, do things around the house, and so on. Years ago, after I learned that Sunday doesn’t work as a Sabbath for a pastor, I considered Friday my Sabbath as well as my day off. But I found that Fridays quickly became filled up with family activities or chores around the house. These things are important, and you have to schedule time for them, but they are not Sabbath activities. So now I try to take Wednesday as my Sabbath day every week. For my church people, just to avoid confusion, I call it a retreat day or a prayer and study day. I try not to schedule any meetings on Wednesdays. If an obligation arises that I can’t avoid, such as a funeral, I try to make up for it by taking Tuesday or Thursday for a Sabbath. I stay away from the office, and often I find it helpful to get away from home as well. A change of scenery can be very refreshing.

There is no one right way to take a Sabbath. **Find the way that works best for you.** Just be sure that one way or another, you take a day every week for rest and reflection and special time with God.

Be sure you take a full day. I have known some pastors who tried to take an hour this day to rest, and an hour another day to read, and half an hour on a third day to play a game, and tried to add all that up and call it a Sabbath. I don't believe that is what God has in mind. It doesn't provide the rest you need for your body or your soul. You need a full, continuous day.

You might object, "But what if someone needs me that day? What if a non-believer comes by the church to talk about Jesus, and I'm not there? I don't want anyone to go to hell because I wasn't on the job!"

Part of that objection is valid. If possible, try to be available when people are most likely to need you, and take your Sabbath when they are least likely – for instance, when most people are at work. Of course, if you also work a regular job with normal hours, this may be difficult, but pray about it and God will guide you.

The other part of that objection is exactly the reason God instituted the Sabbath in the way he did: it requires you to trust God for something that doesn't make sense to our human way of thinking. One of the most visible ways Israel was set apart from the surrounding nations was that they refused to work on Saturdays, even if the olives needed picking, or the grapes needed to be pressed, or the hay was going to get rained on. They trusted that if they obeyed God about the Sabbath, God would take care of them and their families – even when they felt that, as good farmers, they really should be out in the fields. In the same way, as pastors we need to trust that **if we obey God about keeping a Sabbath, God will take care of our churches** and potential new believers, even when we feel that, as good pastors, we really should be in our office or by our phone. Of course, if an emergency comes up, you respond (Matthew 12:11-12). But everything related to the church is not an emergency.

One more quick note: in addition to a weekly rest day, it is important to take regular vacations or holidays as well. In the Old Testament, God commanded his people to take several weeks every year for celebrations or

“feasts.” They were to do no work, but relax and enjoy themselves.

An occupational hazard of pastors is that we often come to feel that we are indispensable. Psychologists say it takes two weeks away to fully achieve the necessary mental and emotional benefits of a vacation. Many pastors fear that the church will fall apart if they go away for two weeks. Actually, the opposite is true. **One of the best ways for your people to learn and grow is to be left on their own for a short time.**

Once I was away from my church for three months. I arranged with nearby pastors to be available in case of an emergency, such as the need to conduct a funeral. Otherwise, the members of the church were responsible for everything, including conducting church services. They were very nervous when I announced the plan, but when I came back, several of them remarked, “The greatest thing that ever happened for my spiritual growth was when the pastor went away.”

Take your Sabbaths. Your church will survive.

Your Spirit

It’s not unusual for pastors to spend so much time caring for other people’s spirits that they neglect their own. You pray for other people; be sure to pray for yourself. You listen to church members; be sure to listen to God. You read the Bible to prepare your sermons; be sure to read the Bible to feed your spirit. You challenge those who think they know all about God; be sure you keep seeking to know more of God. You urge others to regularly examine their hearts and lives; be sure you regularly examine your own.

Ministry is hard. It’s so easy to make excuses. “I can’t take time to pray and read the Bible right now. The people need me!” We can even feel noble about the sacrifices we are making for the sake of our church. But God said, *Obedience is better than sacrifice* (1 Samuel 15:22). That includes obeying God commands to wait on the Lord and be filled with God’s Spirit (Psalm 27:14; Ephesians 5:18).

One of the Bible promises few people want to claim is John 16:33, In the world you will have tribulation. Sometimes this seems doubly true for pastors.

We'll talk about dealing with problem people and situations in Chapter 19. The point for now is to not let them get you down.

We already looked at the importance of keeping yourself healthy and strong spiritually, physically and emotionally. When you are right in these areas, you have a head start on dealing with discouragement.

Please note that discouragement is not the same thing as depression. Clinical depression is a medical condition that can happen to even the best Christians. It is not a moral failure to be judged, it is a disease to be healed.

Getting discouraged is not a failure. Staying discouraged is. So how do you deal with discouragement?

If you are a pastor, I can promise that hard and unfair things will happen to you. You may feel that you have a right to be discouraged. But before you indulge in a pity party, consider David. One day, before he became king, he and his men returned from patrol to find their houses burned and their wives and families taken captive. Everyone was devastated. The men were so upset they were ready to stone David. But 1 Samuel 30:6 says, *David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.*

The Bible doesn't tell us exactly how David strengthened himself. But Paul, who knew a bit about discouragement himself, gives us an outline in Philippians 4:4-8.

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon. Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

Here are the steps I see in these verses:

Verse 4: Rejoice in the Lord. If you can't rejoice about your situation,

rejoice about something else: past blessings, or Bible promises, or the love of your family, or the beauty of a flower. Listen to some uplifting music, or even better, sing. Find something that points you to the goodness and faithfulness of God, and focus on that. And act like you're rejoicing, even if you don't feel like it. Do you think Paul and Silas felt like singing hymns, shackled in that dank Philippian jail with their backs bleeding from the whip? (Acts 16:25) Of course they didn't. But they determined that they were going to rejoice in God in spite of the circumstances, and God gave them a miraculous deliverance. *The joy of the Lord is your strength* (Nehemiah 8:10).

Verse 5a: Be gentle. Discouragement can make you want to lash out at people or do rash things. Don't give in to those urges. Gentleness is strength under control. As you remain gentle, the strength that discouragement saps will begin to return. And often we become discouraged because we feel we have failed somehow, so don't forget to be gentle with yourself.

Verse 5b: Remember that the Lord is near. God hasn't abandoned you, even though it may feel that way. Remind yourself that God loves you, God is with you, and God will care for you.

Verse 6: Turn your worries into prayers. Worry says, "Oh, what if this and this and that?" Prayer says, "Dear God, please handle this and this and that." Tell God your problems and thank him that he's going to take care of you.

Verse 7: Continue until the peace comes. A hundred years ago, American Christians used to talk about "praying through." Pray through the doubt, pray through the discouragement, pray through the darkness until the peace, the light or the answer comes. When you compare the size of your problems to the size of your God, you can't help but find peace.

Verse 8: Protect against future discouragement. Encourage yourself by focusing your thoughts on good things, positive things, things of God. Habits of thought are just like any other habits; they can be formed and broken. Develop the habit of refusing to allow yourself to entertain negative or discouraging thoughts. You can't keep the thoughts from coming, but you don't have to entertain them – or as somebody put it, "You can't stop the birds from flying over your head, but you don't have to let them build a nest in your

hair.” As soon as you notice a worry or a negative thought, tell it to go away in the name of Jesus. Then consciously start thinking about something positive and godly. Learn to renew your mind in the Lord and it will transform your life (Romans 12:2).

The devil wants you to stay discouraged, because when you are discouraged you aren't ministering as effectively as you can. So the devil will tell you you're a failure, or everybody hates you, or you're the only one who has ever felt this way. Most of all, he'll tell you that you can't let anybody else know how you feel. Don't listen to those lies. **One of the most helpful things you can do is find someone you can trust**, perhaps another pastor who will understand your situation, and share your story and your prayers with them.

Many places in the Bible give helpful examples. For instance, many psalms start with complaints but end with faith. I encourage you to do your own study of how people in the Bible strengthened themselves. Preach a sermon on those principles, because pastors aren't the only ones who face discouragement. Then practice what you preach.

Points to Remember

- Your time belongs to God; let him direct how you spend it.
- Your home is your own private space, even if the church provides it to you.
- You can serve God best if you are healthy spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically.
- Trust God to guide your finances; he's better at it than you are.
- Take one day out of seven to rest from your work.
- Care for your spirit.

[i] This is not intended as an example of proper Biblical exegesis. Clearly, my stress level is not what Ezekiel had in mind when he wrote those words. But it is an example of how God can find ways to speak to those who are sincerely seeking to hear from him.

[ii] In some situations it may be better for the wife to work and the husband to stay home with the children. Often it is necessary for both husband and wife to work. The point of this section is not about who works and who doesn't, but about God's faithfulness in providing for our financial needs.