



## WHY SOUL CARE?

JANEL BREITENSTEIN & GARRICK CONNOR

I wish burnout and I weren't on such snuggly terms.

But burnout and I are unfortunate buddies because overcommitment and I are good friends. Funny thing is, I'm burned out for all the right reasons.

I'm seeking to be a nurturing, all-in, all-there mom and wife. I try to be a robust, dependable freelancer and author. I aim to be an available, listening friend. I'm active in church and with their homeless ministry.

Those are great reasons to be completely depleted and resentful ... right?

Let me put it another way: Was Jesus always walking around burned out?

### WHEN THERE'S ALWAYS MORE TO DO

"There is always more we can do in ministry," Christopher Ash writes in *Zeal Without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice*.

"But God is not asking 'Can you do more?' He is asking 'Do you love Me?' Some of those extras are not always as vital as we think them to be."

Sometimes I don't view tasks as extras. As a missionary and mother of four, I know well there's always another basket of laundry to fold, another hand to hold.

But Ash quotes a fellow pastor and volunteer firefighter:

*It's foolishness to ignore your limitations, try to be the hero, and cramp up, pass out, or have a heart attack while in a burning structure because you're beyond the limits of what God has supplied you with the capability of doing. It's a form of heroic suicide that is counterproductive because you're now no longer effective in fighting fire and the resources that were dedicated to fighting the fire are now dedicated to saving you.*

Yet it's more than practicality that drives me.

I want to know the other half of the "chief end of man": not only to glorify God, but to enjoy Him. I want to drink deeply of the existence of which Shauna Niequist speaks in her book *Present Over Perfect*:

*... a life marked more by presence and connection and less by exhaustion and competition...*

*Present over perfect living is real over image, connecting over comparing, meaning over mania, depth over artifice.*

I've invited Garrick Conner, a licensed professional counselor, pastor, and marriage and family therapist, to help us explore some of the questions we sort through as devoted, exhausted followers of Jesus.

## **WHY DO YOU THINK SO MANY CHRISTIANS SUFFER FROM BURNOUT?**

**Garrick:** I believe for many, burnout is yoked to approval. And the church, possibly more than any other organization, is often complicit in driving its most generous volunteers to burnout.

Many Christians work in jobs (or at home) where they are unhappy, unappreciated, and even emotionally and verbally abused. These individuals find safety and belonging in the church and its ministries.

But left unchecked, unmet needs can pave the way for an addiction to approval. Churches run on volunteers, and their high needs can intersect with unmet emotional needs in ways that can become outwardly productive but inwardly toxic.

## **AS CHRISTIANS, WE TEND TO ASSOCIATE "SELF-CARE" WITH SELFISHNESS.**

How does caring for ourselves—and these souls attached to our bodies—fit with Jesus’ command to deny ourselves (Luke 9:23)? Or what about, “in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3)?

**Garrick:** I think we do ourselves a profound disservice when we take certain verses and apply them liberally and universally.

The Apostle Paul also wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”

Now to be clear, Paul is addressing the believer’s freedom when it comes to eating and drinking, faith and conscience. But in the context of self-care, sometimes the good of our neighbor is best served when we take care of ourselves first.

So many times as a pastor, I watch people burn out because they haven’t found a way, amidst rigorous demand, to take care of themselves. But those who don’t tend to their own basic needs for rest, nutrition, exercise, and spiritual renewal are more easily agitated, frustrated, and defeated.

Sadly but surely, it’s *the people they’re caring for* who catch the brunt of those negative emotions.

## DOESN’T THIS MEAN SELF-CARE OR SOUL CARE ARE OPTIONAL?

Shouldn’t we be following the “Jesus first, others next, yourself last” mantra?

So many of us have been told that if there’s an opportunity in front of us to help, this should take precedence.

**Garrick:** Our opportunities to serve will almost always be greater than our capacity.

There are so many considerations that must be weighed in about available opportunities. These include an accurate assessment of our current commitments, many of which are not official or exciting. Menial tasks such as grocery shopping, housecleaning, and transporting kids to activities must not be overlooked, because they all take time and energy.

It’s also important to have a healthy understanding of your own giftedness and passion for the opportunity in view. It’s far better to take on one or two commitments that we’re uniquely equipped to do with enthusiasm than to take on four or five commitments for which we are ill-equipped and disinterested.

Remember:

1. Churches are notorious for filling ministry opportunities with warm bodies.
2. All of us are far less likely to do with excellence those tasks and responsibilities for which we are only marginally equipped and interested.

## WHAT'S THE PLACE OF EMOTION AND SPARE TIME FOR A HEALTHY CHRISTIAN?

**Garrick:** It's extremely important to listen to our bodies. Unfortunately, that's a learned skill that doesn't receive much priority in today's culture where busyness and overscheduling have become idols.

I think we owe much of the blame to modern technology and our seeming inability to leverage it for good while simultaneously limiting its control over us.

When we stop and look at the pattern God established, it's clear that even He rested. And He commanded we rest, too, on the seventh day of each week.

His instruction wasn't about control or even a felt need to rest; it was about loving care. He knows what is best for us and that we can't be in 'go mode' all the time and still function effectively.

For most people in modern-day America, solitude and contemplation are abstract concepts rather than concrete practices. It's like everything we do is in fast-forward, because we're just in such a rush all the time.

We are hurried souls.

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE UNSEEN DANGERS OF OVERCOMMITMENT? WHAT DYSFUNCTION CAN LIE BENEATH?

**Garrick:** I believe we all worship someone or something. Certainly God has created us for relationship with Himself and with others, but our culture has glorified busyness.

Our culture, in its own strange way, rewards us for busyness and overcommitment, conflating them with importance. Hence, if I'm not busy, then I must not be important or valued.

Something always has to suffer when we pile too much on our plates or bite off more than we can chew. The struggle is real.

So is the fallout. It shows up in physical problems like hypertension, lack of sexual intimacy, migraine headaches, and digestive issues—all exacerbated by stress. It also shows up in emotional problems like anxiety and depression.

From a purely spiritual perspective, busyness can point to a flawed theology that says “The more I work, the more worthy I am of salvation, forgiveness, and grace.”

Such a works-based approach can set us up for a lifetime of chasing something that was never meant to be attained through our own efforts and pursuits, no matter how seemingly altruistic.

## WHAT COULD EFFECTIVE SOUL CARE LOOK LIKE—IN BOTH DEEP TREATMENTS AND MORE SUSTAINABLE ADJUSTMENTS TO LIFE RHYTHMS?

**Garrick:** Effective soul care is one of those things that doesn’t just happen. It requires regular attention and willful intentionality.

It’s found in:

- a growing ability to identify those things that are life-giving versus those that are draining.
- establishing a regular pattern of connecting with God and with the most important people in your life—namely your family and closest friends.
- setting healthy boundaries with people who require more energy and availability than you realistically have to offer.
- setting limits on 24/7 technology that competes for your time and attention. As *Life’s Little Instruction Book* counsels, “Don’t allow the phone to interrupt important moments. It’s there for your convenience, not the caller’s.”

For me, soul care also involves giving myself the freedom to have some regular times each day that are unstructured—and guilt-free.

Yes, there’s always something that needs to be done—laundry to be folded, lunches to be made, bills to be paid, emails to be sent, paperwork to be completed. But sometimes good, and even necessary, things have to wait because the better thing is to take care of myself.

*One of the things I know for sure is that those who are looking to us for spiritual sustenance need us first and foremost to be spiritual seekers ourselves...*

*Then, rather than offering the cold stone of past devotionals, regurgitated apologetics, or someone else's musing about the spiritual life, we will have bread to offer that is warm from the oven of our intimacy with God.*

– RUTH HALEY BARTON , *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*