



Compassion Fatigue: Serving Our Lord Faithfully Without Burning Out

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The field of psychology has been studying “occupational burnout” since the 1970s, and “compassion fatigue” (also called “secondary traumatic stress”) since the 1990s. Many people whose vocations are in the “helping professions” are prone to experiencing compassion fatigue or burnout, which results from repeatedly listening to and helping others through their illnesses (including mental disorders), traumas and disasters. Church leaders, both professional and lay, can also be susceptible to compassion fatigue. Church leaders help others afflicted with illnesses and disabilities, but also help others through the afflictions of sin. Members of the congregation and community struggle with the effects of their own personal sin, and the sins that others have committed against them (including physical, sexual and mental abuse). The ultimate effect of our sin is death, and church leaders help innumerable people through the dying and mourning process. All of these experiences can lead to compassion fatigue.

THE COMFORT WE SHARE IS CHRIST’S COMFORT

“Our Lord calls upon us to have compassion for others, to comfort others with the Gospel of Christ. Read together (preferably out loud twice) 2 Corinthians 1:3–6. Notice how many times Paul uses the word “comfort” in just four verses (the Greek is *parakaleo* or *paraklete*):

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.”

Showing compassion toward others, comforting them with the Gospel of Christ is our good and noble calling. List the ways in which you and those in your Bible study group have comforted others in the past year with the Gospel:

List the ways in which you and those in your Bible study group *have* been comforted by others in the past year with the Gospel.

OUR CONSUMING GOD

In his book *Reclaiming Patterns of Pastoral Ministry: Jesus and Paul* (CPH, 1998, 45–46), Jonathan Grothe raises the question of burnout for pastors (and by extension, other church leaders), but in a surprising way. He writes: “Our God *is* a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). But His is also a holy and sanctifying fire, which can burn without consuming that in which it appears (Ex. 3:2; Acts 2:3). Chaff and dross will be burnt away in judgment. That which is pure will abide. That which is burnt off needs to be burnt off. Perhaps some who are experiencing burnout are experiencing the burning out of their sinful ego’s contribution to their understanding of ministry.”

Read the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple in John 2:13–17 (and Psalm 69:9). How did Jesus’ zeal (His “Passion”) consume Him for God’s house (and for you)?

Grothe goes on to point out that faithful church leaders will also be “consumed” by their work for God’s house, by the Word of the cross. Faith-filled church leaders will not be pointing themselves or others to their successes, but “referring to [their] weaknesses and lack of power, [their] sufferings for the sake of the Gospel” (46).

In what ways are we tempted toward “working harder and longer” to show more successes, to show our compassion?

In what ways does Christ’s Gospel call us and renew our strength, our passion, to serve Him with righteous zeal?

Read Ephesians 2:8–10. How do church leaders receive Christ’s grace and forgiveness, when our temptations lead us to work more passionately for success rather than simply doing the “good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”?

What other Bible verses come to mind for you that encourage Christians to be zealous for their work in the Lord (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:58; Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37). How can you remember to interpret those verses from a Gospel perspective, rather than as a Law burden?

WE ARE GOD’S CREATURES

We are creatures. We often forget this truth. God’s creatures are given many gifts. Hawks can fly at great speeds. Cheetahs can run faster than any other creature. Yet these creatures cannot fly or run at such speeds indefinitely; they fatigue. We forget that creatures have limits.

We too often deny to ourselves that we have limits, and we desire to push beyond the limits that the Lord has designed for us. There can be good, even healthy reasons to push beyond our limits. Competitive athletes often set goals to run faster, to swim farther, to lift heavier weights. Setting such goals and striving to push past those former limits can be a healthy, invigorating experience. But it can also lead to damage, to injury. Jesse Owens won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics, beating the German athletes that Hitler was touting as superior. Jesse Owens is a cultural icon, honored for those great athletic feats. But few people remember Eulace Peacock, a runner from Temple University who had beaten Jesse Owens in five of their previous ten races, and in the long jump. Pushing too hard, Eulace unfortunately pulled one hamstring in August of 1935 and the other in April of 1936, and could not qualify for the Olympics because of those injuries.¹

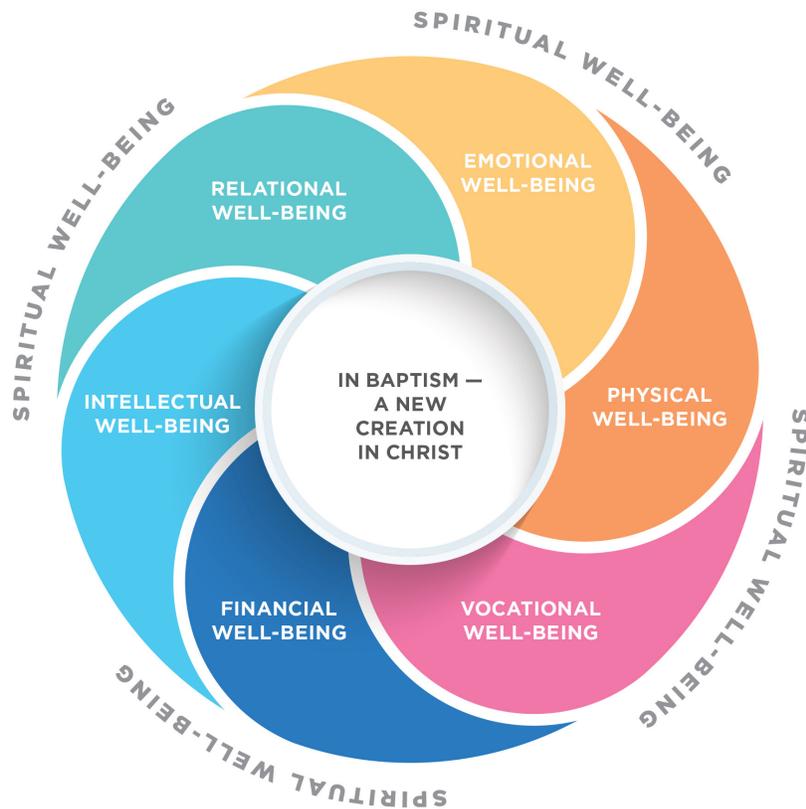
Compassion fatigue is analogous to an injury in that it can keep church leaders from having the energy to perform the good works God has prepared in advance for them to do.

Read Mark 6:30–32. Note that Jesus had just sent out the apostles on their first mission journeys (6:7–13) and they had just learned of the tragedy of John the Baptist’s execution (6:14–29). Why did the apostles need rest? How does it help you to know that Jesus encouraged his disciples to rest after a busy, exhausting season?

¹ Michael McKnight, “Faster than the Fastest: Jesse Owens wasn’t afraid of Hitler or Jim Crow, but He Feared Eulace Peacock,” Sports Illustrated website: accessed June 23, 2020, [si.com/longform/peacock/index.html](https://www.si.com/longform/peacock/index.html).

THE LCMS WHOLENESS WHEEL: BALANCE IN THE LIFE AND ZEAL OF LUTHERAN CHURCH LEADERS

For years the LCMS has had a widely used “Wholeness Wheel” that encourages church leaders to consider all the various components in life, and to seek ways to balance these components in healthy ways. This balance is part of our stewardship of the gifts God has given each of us. It is easy for us to focus on our professional duties as church workers, or important church ministries that lay leaders oversee, and to de-emphasize one or more areas of this Wholeness Wheel:



If readers are not familiar with the Wheel, or have not reviewed the focus of each of the seven areas in a while, you can go to concordiaplans.org/wellness/ministerial-care.html for brief descriptions of each. For a fuller description, see John D. Eckrich’s *Vocation and Wellness: Renew Your Energy for Christian Living* (Tenth Power Publishing, 2016).

Which of these seven areas of well-being do you believe you are valuing and attending to well in your life? What leads you to believe you are attending to that area of your life well?

Which of these seven areas of well-being do you fear you are undervaluing and not attending to as well in your life? What goals might you set that would help you better attend to those aspects of your life?

Read Ephesians 4:15–16 (out loud, twice, noticing that these verses come after the often-cited verses, 4:11–12, about various offices of servant leadership the Lord has given to the church): “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

We North Americans live and serve in a very individualistic culture that drives us to be “successful” by worldly standards. This can lead to loneliness and compassion fatigue even though we are surrounded by other people. How do Paul’s words to the Ephesians (which is actually God’s Word to us as well) help focus us on the basics of love in the body of Christ, the church? How might you who are in this study together show that love to one another?
