

“HOPE FOR THE STRESSED-OUT”

(Matthew 9:35-36)

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**[PROP NEEDED: Puzzle-game “Jenga”]**

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 11-12-23]

--I--

1. **[11am ONLY...]** Read CEB Text: Matthew 9:35-36 and Pray.
  
2. **[SHOW “JENGA” TOWERS...]** I have here a game called “Jenga”, where the goal is to build a tower as high as possible with these wooden blocks without them collapsing.
 

A--If you’re careful, you can build it pretty high. But look what happens when things get out of balance... **[DEMONSTRATE by pulling out key piece to make it fall...]**

B--You know, in many ways, *our* lives are often just like this: ...in building our “towers” of success, we sometimes weaken the foundations that make it all possible, and the result is lives that are out of balance, and end up collapsing around us!
  
3. Well, the “out of balance” experience that I’m describing is something we often call **“STRESS,”** and it’s effects in today’s world are staggering:
 

A--Studies show that nearly two-thirds of all doctor’s visits are prompted by stress-related symptoms, <sup>1</sup> that up to 90% of all illness is stress-related, <sup>2</sup> and that stress is a prime contributor of at least six of the leading causes of death in the U.S. <sup>3</sup>

B--It's been estimated that stress-related illnesses cost American business well over \$300 billion each and every year, <sup>4</sup> and we don’t even need to hear these these stats to recognize how severely stress affects many of our *own* lives!

C--That’s why today, I want us to talk about *God’s healing for, and protection from, stress* -- how (with God's help) there is “*Hope for the Stressed Out.*”
  
4. Now, while the word “stress” is a modern *word*, it’s certainly not a modern *problem*.
 

A--We find it in Jesus’ day, too, as illustrated in today's scripture reading from Matthew 9:35-36. Listen to its words [11am, again]...

*"35 Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. 36 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."*

B--Do you know what a lost sheep is like? ...Kind of like a squirrel darting out in front of a car... dashing to and fro, anxious and desperate.

1--I once saw a sign which said, "*Lord, I try to take each day one day at a time. But it seems lately that I'm being attacked by several days at once!*"

2--*That's* what stress is <sup>5</sup>, and if left unchecked, it can lead to burnout. <sup>6</sup>

5. The easy solution, of course, might be to try to *avoid* stress altogether.

A--But since it's unlikely we can do that given the nature of today's world, <sup>7</sup> the question for us (even as Christians) is not how to *avoid* it, but how to find "balance" and *manage* it -- to keep it under control and avoid burnout. <sup>8</sup>

B--Author Steve Roll says that "*Many lives are broken and ineffective quite simply because they are out of balance.*" So, he says, "*balance is the key to staying on top.*" <sup>9</sup>

C--It's what Jesus knew the "*crowds*" needed in today's scripture, and his "*compassion*" about their stressed and "burned out" condition is partly what motivated his great ministry of empathy and healing throughout the gospel stories.

6. So, with that in mind, let me share four biblical principles I've found helpful in my own life for finding and maintaining "balance" to cope with negative stress. <sup>10</sup>

--II--

7. The first key to balance is to practice **DEVOTION TO GOD and HIS PEOPLE**.

A--No matter how busy Jesus was or how hectic his schedule, he always made time to spend with God, even if it meant doing it *apart from* his public ministry. <sup>11</sup>

B--The problem many of us have is that we're "*too busy*" to pray, read our Bibles, or worship, and the result is that we're weakened to the point where we're susceptible to falling to all kinds of temptation that often accompany stress.

C--Yet, you and I can't stay devoted to *God* without *also* staying connected to God's *people* -- what we call the "*community of faith*", or the "*Church*."

1--Think about it: Jesus was the son of God, and could have done his earthly ministry *all by himself*. But instead, he chose to work *through* 12 very different, very difficult people -- *His Disciples*/"community of faith."

2--And through this example, I think he was teaching us that for us to grow, be whole, and achieve what God has in store for us, we *need each other*.

D--That's why we need the church (flawed as it is)... because it's through our church community (especially our small groups) that we receive *strength, encouragement and challenge* to make it through the stress-filled days of life.

1--Steve Roll is right when he says that “*Lone Ranger [Christians] who isolate themselves from others unwittingly set themselves up for burnout*” <sup>12</sup> -- & I’ve seen this over and over again in the lives of people who *say* they can be “good Christians” *without* the church, only to find themselves “burned out” and alone.

2--So, let me ask: first, how’s *your* relationship with GOD? I.E., how active is your prayer and worship life? And second, are you allowing your CHURCH family to be a source of power and strength for you? <sup>13</sup>

8. A second thing to help us balance our lives is to **INVEST IN KEY RELATIONSHIPS**.

A--None of us can be “all things to all people”, or please *all* people *all* the time, but we *can* invest ourselves in those who are dear to us, so that when tough and stressful times come, we can support and strengthen each other together.

B--Jesus did this in his relationship with his twelve Disciples. And while you and I *don’t* have “disciples,” we DO have family & friends who want to support, encourage and even lovingly challenge us to keep balance in our lives.

C--Author Lloyd Ogilvie says that “*Work without a love relationship spells burnout.*” <sup>14</sup>

D--In other words, it’s in and through the key relationships of our lives that God most works to bring about renewal and refreshment... which means that our friends and family are *not* meant to be a *distraction* IN life with God, but a *fulfillment* OF it. <sup>15</sup>

9. A third key to balance is to make time for **REST** -- what the Bible calls “*Sabbath*.”<sup>16</sup>

A--Another way of saying this is that we need to get *know* and *respect* our *limits*, not just physically, but also mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. <sup>17</sup>

1--Even Jesus knew that he couldn’t do *everything*, which is why every once in a while, he took time apart to experience refreshment and renewal. <sup>18</sup>

2--And if Jesus (the son of God) needed occasional rest, then why would you and I think we can be superman/superwoman and do *without* it?

B--One author says, “[*When we*] regularly exceed reasonable limits, [*it*] puts us on a collision course with collapse.... [*But*] burnout can’t beat [*us*] when rest in the Lord.” <sup>19</sup> So...

1--Take and enjoy that vacation you’ve been wanting;

2--Have a life outside of work by finding a hobby you can enjoy regularly;

3--Quit being a slave to your email or social media -- get some mental “rest” by disabling or just not checking them on your vacation and days off;

4--Get a full eight hours of sleep every night <sup>20</sup>;

5--And even if you have to work on Sunday (like me), you *still* need to take “Sabbath-rest” on *another* day -- *find* a day & guard it! (for me it’s Friday) <sup>21</sup>

10. The final principle I want to mention today is the value of healthy **EATING and EXERCISE** -- basically, this just means staying in good *physical* shape.

A--1 Corinthians 6:19 calls our bodies “*the temple of the Holy Spirit.*” So, for us *not* to take care of ourselves *physically* through proper exercise and diet is to *dishonor God* by providing a less-than-fit vessel through which He can work. <sup>22</sup>

B--I used to take my physical shape for granted. But the older I’ve gotten, the more I realize the importance of things like exercise, getting at least 7000 steps each day, drinking more water, and just overall being a better steward of my physical health.

C--I’ll be honest: I don’t like doing these things. But I know that I honor God and prevent stress in my life when I get and stay physically fit.

--III--

11. So, here then are four principles that can help us find and maintain balance in our lives: **D**evotion to God; **I**nvesting in key relationships; **R**est; and healthy **E**ating and exercise. <sup>23</sup>

A--I want you to notice that together they spell the word D.I.R.E.

B--And it’s my belief that if we *don’t* do these things, then *that’s* the shape our life will be in... *DIRE shape* -- as in: a condition that’s *frightening, severe, and dangerous*.

C--But I also believe that if we *DO* practice these biblical principles on a regular basis, we’ll find the way to physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual “balance,”...

D--...and we’ll be able to discover God’s healing and hope for the “stress” of our lives.

12. [Invite congregants to close eyes and *breathe in* the presence of God’s peace and *breathe out* whatever stress they are feeling... *Do it again...* (and have a moment of silence... then...)]
13. [PRAYER: “*O God, we confess to you that too often we have been so busy doing ‘good’ things with and through our family, our church, or our work that we have neglected to do the ‘needful’ things. As a result, many of us find ourselves stressed-out, burned-out, depressed, and filled with anxiety and fear about the future. Remind us daily of the need for balance, and teach us to follow the example of Jesus by balancing our lives spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically in some of the ways we’ve heard about today. Most of all, give us the power of your Holy Spirit to enable us to have the courage and desire to put these into practice. In the name of the one who gives comfort in the midst of stress and strain... the name of Jesus, Amen.*”]
14. [11am Closing UMH#130, “God Will Take Care Of You”]

## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.stress.org/americas-1-health-problem>

<sup>2</sup> <https://nasdonline.org/1445/d001245/stress-management-for-the-health-of-it.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.slma.cc/the-science-of-stress/>. The six causes linked to stress are: coronary heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidental injuries, cirrhosis of the liver; and suicide.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-stress-at-work-is-costing-employers-300-billion-a-year-2016-6>. This \$300 billion of revenue lost is the cost of health care and missed work days as a result of workplace stress. At the same time, employees are feeling less energetic, more agitated, and getting less sleep due to increased demands at work — causing them to experience physical and psychological symptoms, fight with people close to them, and have more accidents on the job, among other things.

<sup>5</sup> That's what stress does to us, and left unchecked, it can cause the "towers" of our lives to collapse in a more serious condition called "*Burnout*," which is simply the natural result of chronic stress. It is that state of physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion that's NOT an incapacity or an inability to do something, but simply the loss of desire -- we can see and know how to do something, but we just don't want to do it. It comes about not as an explosion, but as a slow fizzle. The problem for many of us is that we don't see its warning signs until we smell our psychological and spiritual wires burning, when we're too worn down to do much about it. That's why it's important for us to understand and identify the burnout process early.

Here are usually four stages in this process: Stage 1 usually starts with a new beginning, such as our first "real" job or getting married. It is a time of high idealism, high enthusiasm, and high energy. After a period of time, our high idealism and energy starts to grate against unexpected realism. We enter Stage 2 where we experience a lessening of energy and enthusiasm. We become more physically and emotionally tired. Also we are becoming more detached from people we care about. If there is no intervention, no slowing or stopping this slide down the slippery slope of burnout, we move to a more serious state of Stage 3. This stage is characterized by chronic fatigue. Now we are physically and emotionally exhausted at the end of the day. And sleep, if it comes, is interrupted and without its restoring purpose (hence the common symptom of insomnia). During Stage 3 we also may experience diffused physical symptoms, such as headaches, muscular aches, heart palpitations, increased blood pressure, or chronic stomach upset. Emotionally, we are irritable with most everyone, and may deal with constant feelings of anxiety, depression, excessive anger, disillusionment, cynicism, and/or bitterness. If there is no intervention, we then move to Stage 4, the most serious stage. This stage is a time of crisis where we are obsessed with our own problems. We can think of nothing else except what is happening to us. We become apathetic and try to avoid work. We become impersonal, detached, and unsympathetic toward other people. Physically, our nagging symptoms become more serious and even life-threatening. In short, we are physically, emotionally, and spiritually worn out. [Cited from Peter Menconi, Richard Peace, and Lyman Coleman, "Stressed Out: Keeping It All Together When It's Falling Apart" in Serendipity Lifestyle Small Group Series (Serendipity House, Navpress, 1988), pp. 55-56, 58-59. In fact, "burnout" itself is merely one stage in a larger process of a loss of care for one's self: *Busyness* leads to *Fatigue*, leads to *Burnout*, leads to *Depression*].

<sup>6</sup> Stress can be caused by many things, including work, worry, a feeling of personal or professional failure, conflict, loss or grief. It can be caused by personal health problems, or the loss of a job, divorce or separation, relationship difficulties, and many others. In fact, even GOOD things like a major achievement or promotion at work, or a new baby, or a new-marriage can cause stress simply because it involves change -- and change is one of the major producers of stress

The following list indicates leading stress producers according to research. To see how much stress you are under right now, circle the points by the things you've experienced over the last 12 months and add up your score. If it totals 150 points or more, you are probably living with a lot of stress in your life right now: Death of spouse, 100; Divorce, 73; Marital separation, 65; Jail term, 63; Death of family member, 63; Personal injury or illness, 53; Marriage, 50; Loss of job, 47; Marital reconciliation, 45; Retirement, 47; Health problem, 44; Pregnancy, 40; Sexual difficulties, 39; Gain of new family member, 39; Business readjustment, 39; Change in financial state, 38; Death of a close friend, 37; Change in line of work, 36; Arguments with spouse, 35; Large mortgage taken out, 31; Foreclosure on mortgage/loan, 30; Change in work, 29; Son/daughter leaving home, 29; Trouble with in-laws, 29; Major achievement, 28; Spouse starting/stopping work, 26; Change in living conditions, 25; Revision of personal habits, 24; Trouble with boss, 23; Change in work hours, 20. [These cited in Peter Menconi, Richard Peace, and Lyman Coleman, "Stressed Out: Keeping It All Together When It's Falling Apart" in Serendipity Lifestyle Small Group Series (Serendipity House, Navpress, 1988), p. 56].

<sup>7</sup> *"There are very few certainties that touch us all in this mortal experience, but one of the absolutes is that we will experience hardship and stress at some point"* [James C. Dobson, Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry #953].

<sup>8</sup> It's something demonstrated by Jesus in his own life, and something we who follow him are encouraged to emulate in our own lives, as well. Consider, for example, that Jesus knew when to work (John 9:4) and when to rest (Mark 5:31); he knew when to preach (Mark 1:14-15) and when to pray (Mark 1:35); when to feast (Matthew 9:10-15) and when to fast (Mark 9:29); when to speak (Matthew 23) and when to remain silent (Matthew 27:12-14); what to live for (John 4:34) and what to die for (Matthew 20:28).

<sup>9</sup> Steve Roll, Holy Burnout: Turning Brokenness Into Blessing Through the Power of God's Restoring Love (Virgil Hensley Publishing, 1996), p. 201. He goes on to state that part of our problem is that *"Americans have evolved into an extremist lifestyle. We pour our energy and efforts into a few select areas while neglecting other things that are vital contributors to wholeness"* (Roll, p. 201).

<sup>10</sup> These four are taken generally from several principles set forth by Roll, Holy Burnout at pp. 202-212. They are also inspired by five principles set forth by Michael Slaughter in his book Momentum for Life: Biblical Principles for Sustaining Physical Health, Personal Integrity, and Strategic Focus (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008): (D.R.I.V.E.) Devotion to God; Readiness for lifelong learning; Investing in Key Relationships; Visioning for the future; Eating and Exercise for Life.

<sup>11</sup> Read, for example, Matthew 14:23; Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 6:45-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 6:12; Luke 9:28; and others. *"At the core of wholeness is a daily relationship with God where we draw near to Him to receive spiritual nourishment"* (Roll, p. 202). Read Also Psalm 62:5-6.

A different author notes that there are two ways of handling pressure. One is illustrated by (#1) a bathysphere, the miniature submarine used to explore the ocean in places so deep that the water pressure would crush a conventional submarine like an aluminum can. Bathyspheres compensate with plate steel several inches thick, which keeps the water out but also makes them heavy and hard to maneuver. Inside they're cramped. When these craft descend to the ocean floor, however, they find they're not alone. When their lights are turned on and you look through the tiny, thick plate glass windows, what do you see? (#2) Fish! These fish cope with extreme pressure in an entirely different way. They don't build thick skins: they remain supple and free. They compensate for the outside pressure *through equal and opposite pressure inside themselves*. Christians, likewise, don't have to be hard and thick skinned as long as they appropriate God's power within through prayer to equal the pressure without (Jay Kesler, cited in "Campus Life," Leadership magazine, Volume 5, No. 2).

<sup>12</sup> Roll, p. 211.

<sup>13</sup> Or do you treat your church participation and commitment merely like a *civic club* that you support and attend when it's "convenient"?

<sup>14</sup> Lloyd John Ogilvie, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry #945.

<sup>15</sup> Too many people make the mistake of thinking that their priorities need to be (#1) God, (#2) family, and (#3) work, as if these three are mutually exclusive. The reality is that "putting God first" simply means that we honor God precisely *in the way* that we love and look after our families and work 'our "priority" for God should *inform and shape* how we relate to all other "priorities." So, for example...if we're married, are we *making time* for our spouse, kids, or grandkids? If we're single, are we *making time* to make and develop our friendships? i.e., HOW are we "investing in the key relationships of *our* lives?

<sup>16</sup> Read Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12-14.

<sup>17</sup> The converse of knowing and respecting your limits is also helpful: get to know your *strengths* and *excel* at them. Learn your spiritual gifts, talents, and personality type, and seek to do work and ministry that utilizes these. We don't need to "spin" our physical, emotional, and spiritual "wheels" trying to do and be people we weren't created to be, but instead discover who we are and claim the freedom to say "No" to things that we're *not*. *"Focus is imperative for fruitfulness. Productivity creates energy. Spinning your wheels saps energy. ...God hasn't called me to accomplish everything. He has gifted [us] for a specific task"* (Roll, p. 210).

<sup>18</sup> Again read Matthew 14:23; Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 6:45-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 6:12; Luke 9:28.

<sup>19</sup> Roll, pp. 210 & 212. Roll goes on to say *"There's nothing weak about acknowledging your personal limitations. Respect your body, family, friends, and colleagues when they tell you to back off. Take a break from the grind. Rest won't kill you. It will help you perform better"* (Roll, p. 210).

<sup>20</sup> If not a full eight hours of *sleep*, at least part of this could be "down time" where we are relaxed before or after we actually sleep.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Read Mark 6:31-32. Today's medical science confirms that there's great value in taking at least one day of rest each and every week, but it's interesting that this was in God's plan from the very beginning in the biblical concept of "Sabbath" rest. Of course, realistically it may or not be possible for us to take our day of rest on Sunday (I can't), but we can and need to make *some* day our "sabbath" and to take it consistently, nevertheless.

<sup>22</sup> What's more is that medically-speaking, vigorous exercise stimulates the production of "endorphins" -- these are the hormones in our bodies and minds that keep us emotionally healthy. When are endorphin levels are high, we feel good physically and it wards off "the blues" (depression). Christian author Frederick Buechner frames it this way: *"Love your neighbor as yourself is part of the great commandment. The other way to say it is, Love yourself as your neighbor. Love yourself not in some egocentric, self-serving sense but love yourself the way you would love your friend in the sense of taking care of yourself, nourishing yourself, trying to understand, comfort, strengthen yourself. ...Take care of yourself so you can take care of [others]. A bleeding heart is of no help to anybody if it bleeds to death"* (Buechner, Telling Secrets, pp. 27-28).

<sup>23</sup> Roll suggests still another principle to help us find and maintain Balance: **Take Time to Enjoy the Little Things of Life**. *“Step away from the big eternal things for a moment and enjoy the blessings of everyday life. Don’t miss the special treasure God has tucked away in the little things along the way”* (Roll, 206). Consider that Jesus was never so busy with big “important” things that he didn’t stop to minister what some might call “little” needs to people (For example, read Mark 5:21-34; Luke 8:40-48; Luke 13:10; and others). For us today, these might include things like enjoying a picnic with our family; enjoying nature as we stroll through our yard or neighborhood, taking time for good, wholesome humor, or not getting so excited about something that we rush out *ahead* of God’s timing! We often get into trouble when we rush ahead of or lag behind His plan. Sometimes we burn out because we run faster than God! Roll encourages us to “[*Learn to*] be at peace with God’s pace.... Sometimes He moves rapidly. Sometimes He doesn’t seem to be moving at all. Nonetheless, let Him set the pace. He knows where He’s going and when He needs to get there. The best of all is -- He wants to take us with Him!” (Roll, p. 212).