

Is Self-Care Selfish?
Stewarding Your Personal Life for Long-Term Ministry
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INTRO – Self-care sounds like man-centered psychobabble. It feels inherently selfish. Self-care seems to contradict biblical concepts self-denial and self-sacrifice. Why would a ministry-minded Christian pay special attention to himself or herself?

Before we reject it, let's learn what self-care is, then see if any part of it aligns with Scripture. Perhaps it belongs on the trash pile of worldly philosophies. Or possibly common grace has made mankind instinctively conscious of a healthy practice.

1. Defining Self-Care

- A helpful definition of self-care is **“the self-initiated behaviour that people choose to incorporate to promote good health and general well-being.”**¹
- Simply stated, self-care is **taking responsibility for your own health and well-being and actively pursuing, maintaining, and protecting it.**

2. Areas of Self-Care

Three areas usually in focus are:

- **Physical well-being** - diet, exercise, and sleep
- **Mental/psychological well-being**, especially how one deals with stress. Stress is one of the primary reasons given for the need for self-care.

The American Institute of Stress defines stress this way: “A condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.”² That's everyday life in ministry!

- **Relational well-being** – harmony and satisfaction in relationships with family, friends, and others

¹ ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/explainingthemeaningandpracticeofselfcare by Mills, Ward, & Fraser

² <https://www.stress.org/>

For Christians, add to those three:

- **Spiritual well-being** – Communion with God and spiritual formation

3. The Need for Something Like Self-Care

Two questions arise when relating self-care to pastors. Does pastoral life increase the need for self-care? And is self-care a legitimate pursuit for a Christian in ministry?

As we consider the first question, we'll focus on the "self" element of self-care in a specific way. "Self" denotes the care of one's self, but it also emphasizes that the individual is proactive in performing this care. That's the part I want to focus on – the individual's initiative. One practicing self-care doesn't wait for a medical professional, family member, or other outside entity to look after his physical or mental well-being.

In the case of a pastor engaging in self-care, he doesn't rely on his deacons or his doctor to tell him he needs to cut back on 70 hour work weeks, eat more whole foods, and go for a bike ride with his family. He takes charge of his habits, schedule, and priorities, and orders his life to fulfill his pastoral role while maintaining balanced personal health.

Herein lies the problem for pastors.

- **The very nature of their vocation is to serve others.** Their time and energy are poured out every day for church members and anyone else who seems to need assistance. One text message can disrupt an entire day, or week depending on the degree of calamity it conveys. A normal ministry week can produce vast fluctuations in the levels of stress a pastor feels.
- **A pastor's life is full of stress-inducing activities.** You can probably identify with this list of stress-inducing activities that fill a pastor's week: [Adapted from *Faithful and Fractured* by Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee, 1-16 – a book based on study performed by Duke Divinity School Clergy Health Initiative]

12 hour workdays; Supervisory relationships requiring managerial and delegation skills; Unpredictable schedule; People seeking help with serious

problems; Unable to take extended breaks from ministry work, or guilt feelings when you do (eg 2 week vacation); Numerous meetings; Expectation of availability to church members; Enlist and oversee volunteers; Be a good leader; Address and resolve conflicts; Perform work without appropriate skill set; Work with political forces in the church; Take criticism – w/o becoming defensive; Perform sacred work;³ Sunday's coming!

Another list of stressors that Christian leaders experience:

Poor diet; poor exercise habits; career uncertainty; role ambiguity; role conflict (between church expectations and personal or family needs); role overload (too many real or imagined expectations); lack of opportunities to 'derole' and be yourself, for a change; loneliness ; time management frustrations; life-change stressors; temptations of all kinds (sexual, despair if your church isn't growing, jealousy of the success of others, anxiety over financial problems, anger⁴

Another helpful resource that identifies areas of a pastor's personal health that need attention is *Resilient Ministry* by Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie. Regarding the need for self-care, they say, "If we combine the expectations of this role with the fact that most pastors are people-pleasers, we can understand how ministry can feel like a never-ending treadmill of trying to satisfy others whose expectations cannot be met."⁵

In the past two years, a new source of stress has arisen in ministry – dealing with COVID. I don't have to cite statistics for you to know that stress, anxiety, depression, and resignation from ministry altogether have increased as a result of dealing with COVID-related issues in the church.

³ *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* by Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee, 1-16

⁴ *Stress and Burnout in Ministry* <http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/8200.htm>

⁵ *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* by Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, 62

Even before COVID, according to Barna Report – *The State of Pastors* published in 2017, 1 out of 3 pastors were at risk of burnout and almost ½ have faced depression.⁶

Pastors are especially susceptible to work and lifestyle patterns that wear them down physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. And, though many church members are affectionate toward their pastors, they are not likely to realize that daily ministry life is a threat to pastors' health and well-being. It would be a very unusual setting in which the chairman of the deacons asks the pastor for a report of his schedule and say, "We want you to sleep more and spend more time with your family. We need to hire an assistant pastor. And by the way, this summer we're sending you on a six-week rest and study sabbatical."

A typical congregation isn't aware their pastor is redlining until he's in the ER with chest pains or suddenly resigns on a Sunday morning. The reality is pastors must take responsibility for gauging their health indicators and maintaining their own routines to preserve and protect their well-being.

Does pastoral life increase the need for self-care? I think the answer to that is pretty clear. What about the second question? Is self-care a legitimate pursuit for a Christian in ministry?

4. Problems with the Concept of Self-Care

We're good with terms like self-denial, self-discipline, and self-control. These are biblically-based concepts. But self-care? It sounds like you're taking yourself to a spa. Try it on your deacons and you'll get a reaction for sure: "I'm taking a few days off this week for self-care." Right.

- The common mentality about Christian living, and especially vocational ministry, is **anything that caters to self is bad**. Self is the enemy, second only to the devil. Anything that appeals to self is automatically suspect.
- **Self-indulgent practices are guilty pleasures**. Soldiers of the cross endure hardship, and they'd better not be caught reading fiction or taking a nap. How could self-care be legitimate for one called to the rigors of ministry?

⁶ *The State of Pastors: How Today's Faith Leaders are Navigating Life and Leadership in an Age of Complexity*, by Barna Group, 11

- This is where a **secular term can blur our perspective of a valid idea**. Self-care sounds like you're being soft on yourself, avoiding difficulty, and putting your own needs first. Of course all of these are the opposite of biblical principles, especially love, which is giving yourself, not coddling yourself.

5. A Biblically-Based Perspective of Self-Care

Does self-care have any place in a pastor's life? If viewed solely from a worldly perspective, maybe in a very limited way. But viewed through a biblical lens, self-care is very like the biblical concept of stewardship.

Self-care, viewed biblically, is stewardship of your personal resources and priorities. It is managing the resources God has entrusted to us for eternal benefit. I want to share several Bible texts with you. I'll mention some and we will turn to one.

Matthew 25:14-30 – parable of talents – investing resources entrusted to us for the benefit of the master

1 Peter 4:10 – *As each one has received a gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*

1 Cor 6:19-20 – *Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit . . . you are not your own. For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.*

Ex 18:13-23 – Moses – change how you do things or you will burn out and hurt the ppl you are ministering to; arrange your work for long-term effectiveness

Mark 6:31 – *And He said to them, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.'*

1 Tim 4:16 – *Take heed to yourself and to your teaching (private life and public ministry)*

1 Tim 5:23 – *No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities.* Treat health issues; prevent if possible

3 John 2 *Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.*

- Here is a helpful definition of legitimate pastoral self-care: **“The wisdom to ensure, as far as humanly possible, a wise and orderly work that conserves and lengthens a pastor’s ministry.”**⁷
- *Resilient Ministry* identifies pastoral self-care as “the ongoing development of the whole person, including the emotional, spiritual, relational, physical, and intellectual areas of life.”⁸
- Nathan Foster describes it as **“attending to and respecting the limitations and needs that God has designed for humans . . . respecting and attending to our human limitations and needs is simply caring for God’s crowning creation, the human machine.”**⁹

The secular concept of self-care is the world’s recognition of what Christians already know. God endowed His creatures with sufficient yet limited capacity to serve and glorify Him. We are responsible to manage our lives in a way that sustains a lifetime of effective ministry. As one pastor quoted in *Resilient Ministry* said, “It’s about burning on, not burning out.”¹⁰

Stewardship is taking responsibility for maintaining areas of your personal life so you will burn on rather than burn out. You manage your life for long-term ministry. You see the need for it, you take the initiative, you make choices, and you live accordingly.

Is self-care an adequate term? My thought is, self-care can be legitimately used, but it needs to be seen as a form of stewardship, and it definitely requires a God-focused rather than a self-centered perspective. I hope this chart will show a helpful distinction between self-care and stewardship.

⁷ *Going the Distance: How to Stay Fit For a Lifetime of Ministry* by Peter Brain, 24

⁸ *Resilient Ministry*, 61

⁹ *Selfish Care, Self-Care, and Soul Care – What’s the Difference?* by Nathan Foster
<https://renovare.org/articles/selfish-care-vs-soul-care>

¹⁰ *Resilient Ministry*, 61

SELF-CARE	SELF- <u>STEWARDSHIP</u>
Take care of yourself.	Take care of yourself for <u>long-term service</u> to God.
Eat, sleep, and exercise to maintain physical health.	Take care of your physical body with nutrition, rest, and exercise because it is the <u>temple</u> of God and for the purpose of <u>long-term</u> ministry. “glorify God with your body”
Set boundaries to protect your personal life. (“Boundaries” are a significant part of secular self-care.)	Set boundaries to ensure you <u>invest</u> appropriate <u>time</u> in all priorities, relationships, and responsibilities for the glory of God.

For example, rather than allowing church members’ needs and expectations determine a pastor’s daily schedule he establishes a reasonable plan for using time throughout the week. He includes time for personal devotion, family time, exercise, and a date with his wife as well as sermon preparation, discipleship meetings, and hospital and homebound visits. A true emergency may alter his plans, but he works the usual requests for his time around the priorities he has established.

An idea that is often associated with ministry is servant-leadership. This is a biblical concept, but must be kept in balance.

6. Balancing Servanthood with Stewardship

The concept of servant leadership can threaten a pastor’s stewardship of his personal life. Some pastors think that because we are supposed to be servants, as Jesus taught in Mark 10:42-25, we should be available to anyone at any time. Other people’s needs or expectations take precedence. This concept has been instilled in us, possibly resulting in a diminished view of stewardship. Herein lies a tension in a pastor’s life – balancing servanthood and stewardship.

- **Servant mindset** - Pastors feel they must be servants, **always available to respond to needs and whatever we're doing is secondary.**
- **Stewardship mindset** - However, pastors need to understand and practice stewardship as well, **proactively choosing how to manage their resources – time, energy, and abilities – to honor God, serve others, and sustain long-term ministry.**

As I thought through the tension between servanthood and stewardship, I developed the following comparison:

SERVANTHOOD	STEWARDSHIP
Horizontal (others) and vertical (God)	<u>Vertical</u> (God) – manager-Master
Need-focused	<u>Resources</u> -focused – what has been entrusted to me and how should I use it
Put others first, before yourself	Put <u>God</u> first, above all – I am accountable to God first
Responds	Takes <u>responsibility</u> – not always responding to others' needs
Gives	<u>Manages, invests</u> – How should I invest my time, gifts, energy?
Immediate	<u>Long-term</u> , eternal
Please people	Give <u>account</u> to God
My time is yours – “open door”	My time is <u>God's</u>
May be motivated by pressure, guilt	Motivated by <u>wisdom</u> – making wise choices, not based on guilt
What others see	What God <u>knows</u> – not controlled by expectations, real or perceived

Almost always says yes; hardly ever says no	<u>Often</u> says yes; sometimes <u>graciously</u> says no – learn how to do this; help spouse with this
Lets others set agenda	Sets an agenda that <u>includes</u> others

Both servanthood and stewardship are taught in Scripture, so they are both valid approaches to life and ministry. It seems to me servanthood fits within stewardship. Culturally, a household manager (“steward”) was one of the servants. So a steward was in the position of a servant. His overall role was a steward. He carried out his responsibilities as a servant by being a good steward. Servants can be wise stewards, and stewards can be faithful servants. But for the sake of this discussion of self-care, let’s highlight the concept of stewardship and relate it to self-care.

This presentation has been more conceptual than practical. But what does self-care look like?

Sufficient rest

Healthful diet

Regular exercise

Consistent and meaningful personal devotion

Spiritual growth

Appropriate commitments of time, energy, and attention to marriage, family, ministry, and friendships, along with discernment in saying yes or no when necessary

Conclusion

As I think through the question, Is self-care a legitimate pursuit for a Christian in ministry, my conclusion is if the self-care we’re talking about is not self-indulgence, but stewardship, then yes. A pastor should maintain his physical body, inner man, and personal life for long-term ministry for the glory of God.