

SERIES: The Ministry of the Market Place

SERMON: **Jethro: How to Turn the Rat Race Into a Relay**

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 18

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Introduction: Work is sacred. It is God's gift so that we might enjoy meaning, purpose, and significance in our daily lives. But enjoyment in work isn't automatic. Like every other aspect of our lives, work has been affected by sin—corrupted, distorted, and twisted. Some people work too much, others work too little or not at all. Some love it; some hate it; some are indifferent to it. We desperately need to recover a biblical theology of work, and that has been one of the primary purposes of this series.

Two Sundays ago we started examining a series of biblical characters who served God faithfully in the market place, with the goal of determining what it was about their character, their perspective, or their actions that enabled them to impact their work world for God. We started with Joseph, whose hallmark was integrity. He worked first as a slave in Egypt, then as a prisoner of Pharaoh, and finally as Prime Minister of Egypt. No matter where he served or in what capacity, Joseph exhibited the same admirable characteristics—hard work, competence, integrity, resistance to temptation, and refusal to take revenge.

Last week Pastor Dick brought a great message about two individuals who were artistic craftsmen—Bezalel and Oholiab. God is a lover of beauty, as anyone can see simply by looking at His Creation. And He has also put creative abilities and aesthetic appreciation in all of us, some more than others. When people use their artistic abilities for God's glory, all of our lives are enhanced.

I remember the statement by Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire*: "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure." Friends, every artist understands that statement. Each one could say, "When I paint, I feel His pleasure; when I sing, I feel His pleasure; when I sculpt, I feel his pleasure." What we all need to realize is that athletes and artists are not the only ones to whom this applies, but to all of us. When I study and teach I feel His pleasure. Amy Michaelis would say, "When I cook, I feel His pleasure (and so does everyone who eats her cooking!)." Evanelle Olinger would say, "When I help a special needs child, I feel His pleasure." And Greg Johnson would say, "When I finish a remodeling job, I feel His pleasure." In fact, one of the signs that we have found our niche in life, our area of giftedness, is that we feel that pleasure.

I'm not suggesting that one has to love everything he does. As long as we are in a fallen world there are going to be some responsibilities that grate on us, and we do them because we must. But what a blessing it is to be in a career where one fits. That would be my hope and prayer for everyone here. If that's not where you are, I would suggest that you first ask God to change your attitude toward your work; if that doesn't happen pray that He will give you a new job where you can feel that pleasure.

Today I want to examine another situation from the life of Moses. This one doesn't fit neatly into the pattern I have established of examining biblical heroes who were neither priests nor prophets, because the two key characters in this story were a priest and a prophet. But the lesson they provide us is so critical for people in every line of work that I am going to ask you to overlook their particular professions and focus on the key principle we will find. Besides the priest in this story, Jethro, was also a rancher, and the prophet in this story, Moses, also wore a number of "secular" hats.

I want us to read Exodus 18, but let me first set the context for you. Moses was the Prince of Egypt, growing up in Pharaoh's household but with a deep consciousness of his Hebrew roots. One day as a young adult he saw an Egyptian beating one of his fellow Israelites; so he killed the Egyptian. When he learned that his act had been observed and that Pharaoh had put out a contract on his life, he fled to Midian, a neighboring country. There he met Jethro, a Midianite priest, who eventually gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses in marriage. For many years Moses worked for Jethro, tending his flocks and raising a family, until the Lord one day appeared to him in a burning bush and asked him to return to Egypt to rescue the Israelites from their slavery.

Moses was very reticent to accept this assignment from God, but after much encouragement, after a few amazing miracles to convince him of God's help, and after learning that the Pharaoh who put the contract out on him was dead, he finally agreed. So Moses went to his father-in-law and asked Jethro to release him to return to Egypt. Jethro said, "Go, and I wish you well." (Exodus 4:18).

Of course, you are familiar with the story of how Moses went to the new Pharaoh and demanded in the Lord's name, "Let my people go." And how God had to bring ten plagues upon the Egyptians before he finally agreed to let the Israelites go. And how Pharaoh pursued them even after finally giving permission. And how God rescued them by parting the sea and swallowing up Pharaoh and his chariots.

The Israelites, free at last, journey through the Sinai desert on their way to the Mountain of God, Mt. Sinai. At every point in their journey God meets their need for protection from the elements, for guidance, for food, for water, and for protection from their enemies. One day as Israel is camped near Sinai, Jethro comes to visit him, bringing Moses' wife and two children, whom he has not seen for perhaps a year. Now let's read Exodus 18:

Now Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt.

After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro received her 3 and her two sons. One son was named Gershom, for Moses said, "I have become an alien in a foreign land"; 4 and the other was named Eliezer, for he said, "My father's God was my

helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh."

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, together with Moses' sons and wife, came to him in the desert, where he was camped near the mountain of God. Jethro had sent word to him, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons."

So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. They greeted each other and then went into the tent. Moses told his father-in-law about everything the LORD had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel's sake and about all the hardships they had met along the way and how the LORD had saved them. Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the LORD had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians. He said, "Praise be to the LORD, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly." Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and other sacrifices to God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God.

The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?"

Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws."

Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."

Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.

Then Moses sent his father-in-law on his way, and Jethro returned to his own country.

"It's better to burn out than rust out!" "What's a candle for but to burn?" I can still remember a Bible camp speaker using statements like these to try to motivate a group of 150 fun-loving kids to dedicate their lives to God. And I heard similar things many times afterward in Bible College and Seminary. The only alternative to burnout always seemed to be laziness and apathy. But is that true? Is burning out in your job a sign of faithfulness, or is it an unnecessary tragedy? Help in answering that question comes from a very unlikely source, as Jethro, a rancher and part-time priest, spares God's greatest leader in the OT from almost certain burnout. We too can learn from his sound advice. But first we need to learn more about burnout.

Burnout is a frequent malady among people in many lines of work, especially in people-helping professions.

What is it? Burnout is a term borrowed from the science of aerospace. It denotes a rocket, soaring upward, running out of fuel and crashing back to the earth. In one sense, the metaphor may be a bit self-congratulatory. Some who describe themselves as "burnt out" probably have never even left the launching pad. Be that as it may, "burnout" has become a very commonly diagnosed syndrome. Scores of books have been published on the topic in the past several decades. I Googled "burnout" and found exactly 18,300,000 entries. I would have looked them all up, but I was afraid I would experience burn-out!

A definition might be helpful: "Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people-work' of some kind. As emotional resources are depleted, workers feel they are no longer able to give of themselves at a psychological level."ⁱ Among the most susceptible are those who fail to resolve frustrations and conflicts, and those who are extremely dedicated and committed. Christians may be more susceptible than most precisely because their sense of responsibility is often high, and they have the added burden of trying to please God in their careers.

Why does it happen? My research shows that there are three primary reasons why Christian leaders—clergy or laity—burn out: First, there is the illusion of indispensability, a subtle sense that God can't get along without them. They have been called to do a task, and if they don't do it, it will not get done. That is untrue, of course, for the Scriptures go to some pains to teach us that while God desires to use us, His plan for the universe is in no way dependent upon us. Nevertheless, such feelings are common.

Second, there is often a sense of basic inadequacy. That may sound contradictory to the first, but actually it is complementary to it. Burnout victims are often people who lack self-esteem at the deepest roots of their personhood. And that drives them to prove their effectiveness and adequacy by overwork and perfectionistic tendencies.

Third, there is a failure to consider and take care of the needs of the whole person—spiritual,

physical, and emotional. If you work too hard, don't get enough sleep, and neglect your body, your emotions and even your relationship with God will suffer.

When these three tendencies are combined in the same person, as they often are, burnout is not only possible but nearly inevitable. But there are other contributing factors to the problem of burnout, like:

- unrealistic expectations of one's work
- unrealistic analysis of one's gifts and talents
- job saturation (letting one's work infiltrate every part of his life)
- indefinite job descriptions or evaluation
- unexpressed appreciation
- lack of support from family members
- ungrateful clients or fellow-workers

Some of you can relate, can't you?

What are the symptoms? What are some of the warning signs of burnout that should cause us to sit up and take notice either for ourselves or for someone we love? We have time to only mention a few:

- emotional exhaustion and low energy levels
- sleepiness in the daytime, insomnia at night
- paranoia, irritability, and worry
- loss of discipline at work or in other areas of life
- feelings of hopelessness
- anger at those making demands
- self-criticism for putting up with the demands
- frequent headaches and gastrointestinal disturbances
- weight loss or gain

What are the results? I mention this to help us see that the problem we are talking about today is a serious problem with potentially severe consequences:

- job loss, voluntary or otherwise
- broken relationships
- shame and embarrassment
- depression
- even suicide

Robert Murray McCheyne graduated from Edinburgh University at age 14 and pastored a Presbyterian congregation of over 1,000 by the age of 23. He worked so hard his health broke. Before dying at age 29, he wrote, "God gave me a message to deliver and a horse to ride. Alas, I have killed the horse and now I cannot deliver the message." McCheyne judged that he had not

been a wise steward of the life God had given him but had squandered it—not in riotous living but in riotous serving. Friends, this is a possibility, not only for pastors but also for those in the market place, especially those in the people-helping professions. You can waste your life by laziness, or you can waste it through workaholism. Either way it's a waste.

In Exodus 18 we have a clear example of a godly man who narrowly averted burnout. If we take seriously the solution by which he was spared, I believe we will go a long way toward preventing burnout in our own lives and helping those we love prevent it in theirs.

Moses is a prime candidate for total burnout.

The first thing that stands out to me is . . .

His single-mindedness. Moses was extremely reluctant to accept God's assignment to be Israel's deliverer, but once he agreed he poured his whole being into it. One of the ways this shows up is in his willingness to send his wife and sons back to Midian. If you examine the details of the story as recorded in Exodus 4 you discover that Moses took his family with him when he returned to Egypt after the burning bush, but they didn't stay long. Apparently either Zipporah got homesick or Moses decided that the dangers and rigors of his task were too much for his family and he sent them back to her father's home in Midian.

I suggest this willingness to be away from his family for an extended period of time in order to devote full attention to the task God called him to, indicates incredible single-mindedness, but that's not entirely positive. While I don't think there's enough evidence in this case to make a certain evaluation, it is my opinion that rarely, if ever, will God call us to do something that demands an inordinate amount of time away from the wife and children he has given us. No matter how much money you earn, fame you achieve, or even spiritual satisfaction you receive, it is probably not worth the stress and strain that extended separation brings upon a family.ⁱⁱ

I will go further in my observation about Moses' single mindedness. When his family arrives for a visit during the journey to Sinai it says in verse 7: "So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. They greeted each other and then went into the tent. Moses told his father-in-law about everything the Lord had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel's sake." See anything odd about that? Not a word here about Moses kissing his wife, or taking a day off to be with her, or playing with his children. I recognize the danger of any argument from silence, but if one takes this story at face value, I doubt there are many women here who would envy Zipporah. Questions about his single-mindedness are only heightened when we look, second, at his schedule.

His schedule. Verse 13: "The next day Moses took his seat (still no mention of his family) to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening." In his capacity as judge Moses is applying God's will to the lives of the people. There's not a more important assignment anyone could possibly have. But this is a killer schedule, and the implication is that this was normal for Moses! He must have been running on pure adrenalin.

Frankly, I both admire and pity him. I admire the fact that he's willing to spend himself in this way, but I also pity him because what he is attempting is inhuman. Well, why did he do it? What were his motives?

His motives. I think one has to do a bit of sacred psychoanalysis here to separate Moses' conscious motives from the unconscious ones. His conscious motives were undoubtedly pure. He reveals something about them in verse 15, when he protests that he's doing a necessary task for needy people. I have no problem accepting that Moses really believes he is doing the right thing. But I also suspect there are some subconscious personal needs operating here. We've already seen that Moses had a strong sense of personal inadequacy, which caused him to decline God's initial invitation to be the leader of the Israelites. Although he eventually accepted the assignment there's no reason to suppose that his tortured self-concept was immediately cured.

Friends, it is quite common for an insecure leader to become a driven person. After all, he dare not let people down, because he needs and desperately desires their approval to affirm his personal worth. The long lines of people are a constant affirmation to Moses that he is needed and therefore valuable. I know the feeling. When I came here in 1975 it was my first pastorate and I desperately wanted to succeed. I didn't know how to say "no" to anyone or anything. I still remember arriving at the parsonage on a Wednesday in July, 1975, after a three-day trip from Miami, and while we were unloading the truck I was told it would be great if I could attend a church softball game the next evening. Jan said, "You're going to do *what?* The beds aren't even assembled!"

Three days later I taught Sunday School, preached on Sunday morning and evening, and the next Wednesday I began a Bible study. Within two weeks my sermon barrel was empty, but I didn't have a single Sunday off for the first six months. It was nuts! And it only got worse as the church grew.

Why did I do that? Well, for one thing I didn't know any better. The elders apparently didn't know any better either because no one tried to slow me down. But in addition I wanted approval and affirmation. By 1983 I nearly crashed and burned. I went to Irv Penner and said, "I can't sleep at night; I can't stay awake during the day; I've lost my motivation. What's wrong with me?" After about 20 minutes Irv said to me, "You're clinically depressed!" He didn't use the term burn-out because it wasn't a diagnostic term then, but that's in effect what I was dealing with.

Irv gave me some great advice about how to deal with my situation, including some adjustments in my work schedule, and within a few months I was reasonably healthy again. Over the years I've come to a more mature evaluation of my gifts and a greater recognition of my dispensability, but even now there are days when my schedule is full, but someone wants to meet with me. And even though wisdom would mandate an appointment in a day or two, there is something deliciously invigorating about being needed, and I am tempted to say, "Sure, come ahead." Many of you have experienced the same thing in your jobs. Some of you will work your head off if your boss shows you enough appreciation—not because you are working as unto the

Lord but because you desperately need the affirmation!

Such a situation sows the seeds of burnout. Well, thankfully there is one man with enough concern, courage, and insight to rescue Moses before he hit the skids.

Jethro rescues Moses before he hits the skids. (17-27)

But let's be really honest.

His concern may not have been entirely selfless. After all, he is Moses' wife's father and the grandfather of Moses' children. He can see what Moses' single-mindedness is doing to his family. Nevertheless, I have to believe, because of the light in which he is presented in this passage, that Jethro also has a genuine interest in the welfare of Moses and the Israelites as a people. He speaks sadly that both are wearing themselves out, Moses by working too hard and the Israelites by standing in line. Concern rarely accomplishes anything, however, without courage.

His courage. He speaks up and says to Moses, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone." Please don't underestimate the courage it took to say this. Would you go up to a world-class leader like Charles Stanley or Chuck Swindoll or John MacArthur and say, "What you are doing is not good. You need to quit writing so many books and speaking at so many conferences in addition to pastoring your mega-churches. Relax a little."? I doubt it. Nor would you go to the principal of your school or the C.E.O. of your company and say something similar. You retort, but I'm not their father-in-law. True, but since when is it easier to talk to an in-law than it is to a perfect stranger about something you think is stupid?

But Jethro not only demonstrates concern and courage; he also has a solution to offer. Don't miss this point: rarely is criticism warranted unless you offer some help in how to solve the problem.

His insight involves several steps. He first encourages Moses to continue to be the people's representative before God because that's the role God had given Moses. But he suggests a major change in *how* Moses fulfills that responsibility. Jethro counsels him to spend the bulk of his own time teaching and applying the truth, but to turn the administration of disputes over to capable men (well qualified men of unimpeachable character, please note) who are trained (presumably by Moses) to handle all but the most difficult cases. Those cases will still be brought to Moses.ⁱⁱⁱ

The benefit of Jethro's plan is two-fold (verse 23): (1) Moses will be able to stand the strain, and (2) all these people will go home satisfied, because they won't have to stand in line so long. (Frankly, I think Jethro is a saint — anyone who can figure out how to lessen the time spent standing in line is a hero in my book!)

Moses' response. Please do not overlook the fact that Moses listened to his father-in-law

and did everything he said. That says more to me about Moses than almost anything else I have seen in his life to this point. This man is powerful, esteemed, dedicated, and at this point the undisputed leader of over 2 million people. But he listens to his father-in-law, a rancher and part-time Midianite priest! No wonder God calls him the meekest man who ever lived!

God's will for us is not to burn out but rather to be poured out.

I would not want to leave anyone with the impression that Christian workers should take it easy, make leisure and pleasure the focus of life, and look out for #1. That's not my point at all. I believe in hard work; in fact, virtually my entire adult life I have worked six full days a week. But not seven! Even God rested after working six days and He commands us to do the same. Instead of looking out for #1 and desperately trying to climb the corporate ladder we should be going hard *after God*, glorifying Him through our bodies, minds, and spirits. The question is, "How is God best glorified—by my burning the candle at both ends or by balanced Christian living?" I think you know the answer to that question.

Nowhere in the Bible will you find God encouraging His people to burn themselves out through overwork. He does urge His people to commit their lives completely to Him, to be willing to do anything He requires, and even to sacrifice our very lives, if necessary, for His cause. But the difference between being burned out and being poured out is that the former is usually the result of dedication to our own agenda and allowing that agenda to control everything else. Being poured out is accepting God's agenda and pursuing it in an obedient and balanced fashion.

The example of our Savior is extremely instructive here. Jesus spent 30 years preparing for three years of ministry. He died prematurely at the age of 35 or so, pouring his life out according to the will of His Father. But did He burn out? No way! Never do you get the impression from the life of Christ that He was even in a hurry, much less fretting or stewing. More in demand than any of us will ever be, He knew how to say "no" and often escaped the crowds by going off to a lonely place to be alone or to pray. If the only perfect example on this earth could say "no" to demands which were too great for His human body and human emotions to endure, dare any of us who follow Him be so arrogant as to presume that we are more indispensable?

Very quickly, I want to share three principles from this text.

Points to Ponder:

1. Christians are not exempt from the consequences of breaking life's natural laws. When you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior you receive eternal life, you become a part of God's family, you are sealed and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and a hundred other marvelous things happen to you, but you don't stop being human. And I'm not aware of a single law of nature you escape when you become a Christian. If you burn the candle at both ends, instead of being used by God, you will be used up.

2. Training and delegating is, in the long run, the most efficient way to get things done. It's

also God's way. For years I lived with the utterly bankrupt notion that if I wanted something done right I'd better do it myself. In the short run that may be true. But in the long run it's absolutely false. It will destroy us and, worse, it prevents us from realizing the joy that comes from training others to use their God-given talents. It's amazing how quickly a critic can be turned into a sympathizer and companion if asked to join the team. I like the way F. B. Meyer said it: "It is a great matter to be a good workman, one not needing to be ashamed; but it is a greater to be able to call out other workmen, and to set them at work." I believe God wants us to turn the rat race into a relay.

3. We must not allow the tyranny of the *urgent* to keep us from doing the *important*. A thousand things scream at us that they need to be done, but only a few are really important—family, health, relationships, worship. The most important, of course, is attending to our relationship with God. Martha was perhaps near burnout trying to get ready for the Lord's visit, and when He arrived she asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," He answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better." That one thing Jesus spoke of is worship. I'll tell you something—the person who takes time to worship—not only in church but in his or her own personal life—will never be in danger of burnout.

*One thing is needful, O my Father,
One thing is needful, O my God;
That I sit at Your feet and pour out my love,
This thing is needful, O my Lord!*

*I sit and worship You, my Father,
I sit and worship You, my God.
Lord, I sit at Your feet and pour out my love,
I sit and worship You, my King!*

i. Charles E. Perry, *Why Christians Burn Out*, 15.

ii This has been a major tension in ministry families, particularly missionaries, for decades. Due to lack of schooling options many missionary children have been separated from their parents for extended periods for many years. While some of those children have survived relatively healthy, it is a well-known fact that a significant number have suffered emotionally and spiritually—so much so that a number of mission boards have taken boarding school off the table as an option for their staff.

iii. Our whole judicial system is built on this concept. Our Supreme Court handles only the most difficult cases, while appeals courts, district courts, state courts, and justices of the peace handle the administration of cases with descending order of complexity.