

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JUNE 6, 2021

GENESIS 3:8-15 | PSALM 130 | 2 CORINTHIANS 4:13 – 5:1 | MARK 3:20-35

There's a conversation I've had again and again with people over the past year or so. You ask politely, "How are you?" And they respond, "Good." And you say, "No, but really." And they respond, "I'm really burned out."

You can be burned out from work, of course, but you can be burned out from pretty much everything else, too. Parenting, caregiving, studying, service, organizing, etc. You're burned out when you have that feeling of being exhausted, of feeling like you can't make any decisions, of feeling like the effort you put in gets you nowhere. Burnout isn't *I'm tired from pulling weeds all day, but my garden looks great*. Burnout is *I'm tired from pulling weeds all day. And the weeds come back every time I pull them out, my neighbor keeps asking when I'll get a chance to fix the weed issue, and I don't have child care*.

People have all sorts of theories for why burnout exists. Public resources or private problems. Late capitalism¹ or just the stress of living. In his book *The Burnout Society*, Byung-Chul Han writes that the root of the problem is an "excess of positivity."² We tell ourselves that we can accomplish anything through enough grit and hard work. And so whenever we encounter a problem, we assume that the problem is with us. And so we just bear down and work even harder. That's part of why that seemingly banal conversation where people say they're well when they're really not is so revealing. Excessive positivity causes burnout. And excessive positivity is how we hide it.

Burnout isn't necessarily a modern condition. In fact, if you read the Bible, you find all sorts of characters who are burned out. The most noteworthy example is Moses, who leads the Israelites out of slavery into freedom only to have the Israelites get into freedom and decide that they had better food back in Egypt. In the book of Numbers, Moses laments to God, "I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me."

And you get a similar dynamic in today's reading from 2 Corinthians. St. Paul has been traveling around spreading the good news. And it's been hard. The travel is hard. The instability is hard. And, not to put to fine a point on it, the Corinthians are not exactly the easiest people to work with.

That's the context when St. Paul writes, "Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." You get the honesty about the difficulty of his calling. You get a promise about being renewed day by day. Fine and good. But you also have a question to answer. What does Paul mean by inner nature and outer nature?

There are a bunch of different ways you can interpret that. One way is that say that the inner nature refers to a soul and the outer nature refers to your body. Another way you could interpret that is to say that the outer nature refers to physical stuff and the inner nature refers to spiritual stuff. Neither one of those is quite right. If we're dividing up your soul from your body, then it's tempting to think that bodies don't really matter. When we know that they do. Paul even says that the resurrection of Jesus is "made visible in our bodies." You don't have to leave your body behind to encounter God. And we know it's not dividing the physical stuff from the spiritual stuff. Creation is good. When God creates in the Hebrew Bible, God doesn't say that creation is a useful means to some spiritual end. God says that creation is good. So that's not it either.

¹ Anne Helen Petersen, *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020).

² Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford University Press, 2015).

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So what is this inner nature and outer nature thing about? Well, it helps to think of this not as two different parts of us that are separated from one another but as two different perspectives on the same thing. By the outer nature, Paul's talking about how others view us, judge us, and evaluate us. That means status, money, power, influence. If that's the measure by which you judge the success of the early church, it's a failure. It doesn't look all that great. In fact, one of the major obstacles Paul had in getting people to take him seriously was that he wasn't impressive enough. People expected to see God at work in people who were composed and handsome and measured and had a wife and 2.1 kids with a dog and a white picket fence on Hartung Drive. Not a short-tempered man who jumps from place to place every year and has a side hustle making tents. From the perspective of the outer nature, Paul is wasting away day after day.

And by the inner nature, Paul means our entire selves that are being made new in Christ. Not our wealth, status, influence or any of that stuff that looks impressive but turns to dust. But our participation in God's work by the gift of the Holy Spirit. If you're judging by the inner nature, what is actually lasting, Paul's mission is succeeding. As he puts it, "Grace... extends to more and more people... to the glory of God."

People look at Paul and think he's failing. But he says that he's actually succeeding. And, more than that, it's precisely when he's failing in the eyes of the world that his work takes on the most power. In fact, he says, the fact that he's not all that impressive just goes to show that it's not his own charisma that's making his ministry successful. It's God. That's why Paul can say that he's wasting away but being renewed. Failing but succeeding. Dying but living.

It's hard for us to live in that paradox. It's easier, at least in the short run, to just stay relentlessly positive. To never admit our weakness. To never admit a shortcoming. To just bear down and strive even harder after perfection. But the end result is often that we feel like we're just wasting away.

There's one group of people that embodies this paradox. And this is not a group of people I talk about much in church. Clowns. The whole point of clowns is that they fail where you think they will succeed and succeed where you think they'll fail. In one of his books, Jacques Lecoq, the French clown teacher, recalls a workshop where his students were called up on stage and told, "Make us laugh." And they did all these stunts. And no one laughed. And so they tried even harder and did even more exaggerated routines. And no one laughed. Lecoq writes that everyone "went back to their seats feeling frustrated, confused and embarrassed. It was at this point where they saw their weakness, that everybody burst out laughing."³ Wasting away but being renewed. Failing but succeeding. Dying but living.

Paul reminds us that our weaknesses can actually be life-giving to others. We are not a place or a community of people who are perfect. Or where people can't have weaknesses. Or where people have to be relentlessly positive all the time. But a place where we can be renewed. Because the body of Christ is manifested in our bodies not when we achieve some impossible standard of perfection but when grace extends to more and more people. The weaknesses that we try to cover up and avoid can be life giving to others.

We are always wasting away but always being renewed. We are failing but always succeeding. We are dying but always living.

Joseph Schattaer Paillé, Pastor

³ Quoted in Adam Hearlson, *The Holy No: Worship as a Subversive Act* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).