

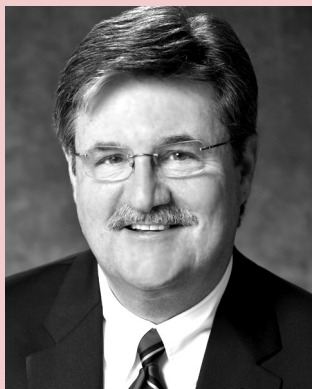
DR. MICHAEL B. BROWN

Handling Stress

SERMON VOL. 11/11

MARBLE VISION

Media Ministries of
Marble Collegiate Church



Dear Friend,

Unless you are a hermit on a desert island, you live in a world of stress (and I'm guessing even the hermit has some anxiety from time to time, if the truth were known). It is a reality of life. And whereas reducing stress is always a great goal, there is a limit on how much of that we can do. Perhaps our primary concern is not so much finding a way to reduce stress as finding a way to manage it. I think Christ provided a wonderful model for doing that. This sermon examines that model. I hope you will find it helpful.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael B. Brown". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

DR. MICHAEL B. BROWN, MINISTER

Handling Stress

Luke 6: 1-13

My Mom believed: “Those who fail to plan, plan to fail.” As a child, an active child, I got my share of bumps and bruises, like most kids. Also, I got cuts. Bumps and bruises I could handle, but when I got a cut, my normally gentle Mother turned into a sadist. She would wash the cut with soap, then with alcohol. She said: “This gets the germs out.” Well, you know how alcohol feels on a cut. I would have rather let germs in! But, as if that were not enough, then she would put iodine on it, which is worse than alcohol. She said: “This keeps the germs out!” Every time I got a cut, she did the same thing. She used to call it her “CUT PLAN.” Mom said you have to have a plan for handling emergencies so that they don’t handle you.

So, she usually had an extra set of car keys hanging above the washing machine, in case she couldn’t find her primary set of keys. She called it her “LOST KEY PLAN.”

She literally kept extra cash in the cookie jar, just like in 50s sitcoms. When she got change from the grocery store, the gas station, whatever, it would go into the cookie jar. That jar was called her “RAINY DAY PLAN.” And, I was forbidden to touch the jar. She warned

me that if I did, she also had another plan in mind. I was never brave enough to risk finding out what that was.

So, over the years as I began to realize that life in this world is often stressful – and sometimes there’s very little I can do to control the factors that bring stress – I always remembered Mom’s wisdom and began to ask myself: “DO YOU HAVE A PLAN FOR HANDLING STRESS?” Because, if not, then ultimately stress will handle us.

Our morning scripture lesson revealed that Jesus had a simple and effective plan for dealing with stress. Life is full of stresses. We talk about the bad economy. He knew all about that. He said: “Birds of the air have nests, foxes have holes, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” We talk about not knowing who to trust. He was betrayed by one of his closest friends, denied by another, and abandoned by almost all the rest of the people he counted on. We talk about political unrest and terrorism. He was pursued by King Herod who, in an act of blatant terrorism, murdered every male baby in Jesus’ home town. He was arrested by the forces of Caesar Tiberius, and convicted by Pontius Pilate. We’re blessed at Marble, but lots of people in other congregations often find as much conflict as they do peace in church. Jesus understood that. He was

constantly harassed and accused by the scribes and Pharisees. In our morning lesson, e.g., they criticized Him for getting his disciples food when they were hungry – and for healing a man with a withered hand – because he did those things on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees said you are not supposed to work on the Sabbath. In short, in their eyes, He couldn't do anything right. Even when He helped people, they had it in for Him. If you've ever been the object of micromanagement or constant criticism or irrational unkindness, then you know how stressful that is. But, Jesus had a plan for Handling Stress. The story includes three lines that describe His plan:

“He went out to the mountains...,”
“He called His disciples...,”

AND, “All night He continued in prayer to God.” In other words, in times of stress – Jesus turned away from the source, turned to His friends, AND turned to His God. It was His “STRESS PLAN.”

So, what about you? Stress is inevitable. Do you have a plan for handling it? Because if not, then ultimately stress will handle you. So, if you don't have a plan, let's take a brief look at the one Jesus used.

First of all, HE TURNED AWAY FROM THE SOURCE. The story says: “He went

out to the mountains...” He took a break. That doesn’t mean that if we hide our head in the sands, the things that bother us will magically disappear. It doesn’t mean if we ignore it, it will go away. It simply means that occasionally you need a time out from trying to manage the heavy burdens of life. You have to lay them down now and again in order to have enough strength to deal with them for the long term.

I had a conversation with a performer recently, a successful jazz singer, who said she had taken four months off. She walked away from recording. She walked away from performing. She spent four months planting, tending, and harvesting a vegetable garden in the country. “Why did you do that, when you’re in such demand?” I asked, and she answered: “Sometimes I have to put the business of singing on hold for a while, so that I can rediscover my passion of singing.” To be successful in the business, she will never escape the stress of the business. But in order to manage the stress, once in a while, she has to lay it down and walk away.

“Jesus went out to the mountains...”

Let me show you what this principle looks like. Right now you are watching me hold two glasses of water at arm’s length. How much do you think these glasses weigh?



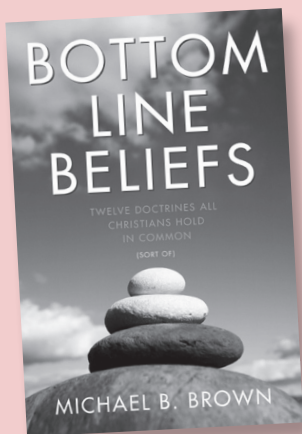
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In truth, it doesn't matter whether it's 8 ounces or 20 ounces. What matters is how long I hold it. Hold it for a minute, no problem. Hold it for 20 minutes, and my arms will begin to ache. Hold it for hours on end, and I would pass out from the pain of it. The longer I hold it, the heavier the weight becomes.

Whatever stress you are experiencing – whatever painful emotion or memory or fear you are holding onto – from time to time you have to lay it down, walk away, and pick it up again tomorrow. Because if you carry a burden too long, its pain will become unbearable.

Second, in moments of stress, JESUS TURNED TO HIS FRIENDS. The story says: “And when it was day, He called his disciples...” In midst of a season of stress, Jesus surrounded Himself with people he knew and loved and trusted.

I have a friend in North Carolina who is a gifted and respected minister. I've known him all my adult life. When I lived there, every so often I would get a text on my cell phone. It would simply say: “I need my friend.” There was a place we'd always meet for nachos and sweet tea. As soon as we were seated in the booth, he would say: “I really needed a break today.” I always knew what that meant. Usually something serious was going on in his church – or sometimes in his family

– something too big to carry alone. I knew and he knew that I couldn't fix his issues, but he never asked for that. He simply wanted to know that he didn't have to face those issues alone, to know that someone was in his corner. And many a time I was the one who sent the text because I was facing an issue and needed to see a trusted friend in my corner.

In times of stress, lean on your friends. Talk to them. Laugh with them. Cry on their shoulders. They may not be able to solve all your problems, but as the old saying goes: "A burden shared is half as heavy!" A famous preacher, now deceased, in our city, used to say: "Friends are God's way of compensating us for our families!" That's a funny line but, in truth, trusted friends who care, who we know we can rely on, are indeed a sacred gift from God... and a valuable tool for handling the inevitable stresses of life. "And when it was day, Jesus called His disciples..."

Finally, in moments of stress, JESUS TURNED TO GOD. The story says: "And all night He continued in prayer to God."

I was in the doctor's office a couple of weeks ago. The receptionist knows I am a minister, so she began to talk about her faith. In addition to being a single mom with a full-time job, she is also finishing

her final year in seminary. She told me of the time when her husband left. She was alone with two elementary school-aged children. No job. No savings. She said more than once, the cupboard was bare – no food, and maybe nothing more than a quart of milk in the fridge. Late in the afternoon she would tell her kids to set the table for dinner. Her older child, a daughter, would answer: “But, Mom, there is no food.” The mother would respond: “We may have no food, but we have God, and God provides. So, set the table, and the food will come.” She told me that almost without fail, someone would call or stop by: “I just fixed dinner and had some left over.” “I just went to the market and got this extra bag.” I don’t know how you feel about stories like those, but this much is sure – she was a woman of powerful faith in a situation many would have called “hopeless.” Her faith was her antidote to fear, anxiety, and stress. “Set the table, and the food will come.”

Even if your faith is profoundly different from that, your own personal experience of faith is still your greatest tool in handling stress. Reading the Bible helps you re-order priorities, figure out what’s really important, and thus helps you quit stressing over so many things that aren’t that important, after all. Prayer brings an awareness of a Greater Presence, a Spiritual Nearness, an assurance that whatever you are facing, God is there

facing it with you. There is so much wisdom in the title of a poem written by Carl Boberg in 1885: “Let Go, and Let God.” Let go of trying to handle all of life’s problems alone – and let God do for you what you cannot do for yourself. Part of Christ’s plan for handling stress was to turn to His faith. “And all night He continued in prayer to God.”

Stress will come. It is inevitable. It’s the kind of world we live in. And, if we don’t have a plan for handling it, it will ultimately handle us. So, Christ provided us a model – and I think it’s a good one. When seasons of stress arrive at your doorstep:

- Know how to lay them down from time to time, so you will have the strength to pick them back up...
- Lean on your friends...
- And, lean on your faith

Do those three things, and instead of allowing stress to manage you, you instead, will handle it.

CLOSING PRAYER

Loving God, grant unto us all a way to live amid and yet above the day-to-day stresses of life. And most of all, remind us that whatever we face and however difficult a temporary road might be, You are there, walking it with us, providing our strength. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

MARBLE VISION

MEDIA MINISTRIES OF MARBLE COLLEGIATE CHURCH

Dr. Michael B. Brown is the minister of New York City's historic Marble Collegiate Church. This publication is an edited sermon, originally delivered by Dr. Brown from the pulpit. We believe you will find his message one of encouragement and challenge for growth in your daily life.

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