

CLERGY RESILIENCE SERIES

A CLERGY RESILIENCE PRACTICE

Grace and Self-Compassion

Learning from Imperfection Without Being Defined by It

LORNE BOSTWICK



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CLERGY LEADERSHIP AND RESILIENCE SERIES

RETURNING READER?

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About the Clergy Resilience Series

Ministry can be deeply life-giving. It can also wear you down.

The work asks us to enter people's grief, conflict, fear, hope, illness, joy, disappointment, and change. We preach and teach, lead organizations, respond to crises, manage conflict, accompany people through suffering, celebrate with them, make decisions, and carry responsibilities few people in our congregations ever fully see.

Sometimes we do all of that while trying to make sense of what is happening in our own lives.

Over time, ministry leaves its mark.

You may notice that you are more tired than you used to be. Criticism stays with you longer. You carry other people's problems home. Saying no produces guilt. Conflict occupies your mind long after the meeting ends. Prayer has become something you do professionally rather than something that nourishes you. Perhaps you feel lonely, spiritually dry, cynical, constantly hurried, or simply beaten up.

These experiences do not necessarily mean you are failing at ministry.

They may mean that something deserves your attention.

Resilience Is More Than Endurance

Clergy resilience is sometimes understood as the ability to withstand the pressures of ministry—to become tougher, develop thicker skin, recover more quickly, and keep going.

But resilience is not simply endurance.

Nor is it another name for self-care.

Resilience is the developing capacity to remain personally healthy, relationally connected, spiritually grounded, and vocationally faithful through the ordinary and extraordinary stresses of ministry.

That capacity develops over time.

Emotional awareness helps us recognize what is happening within us. Differentiation helps us distinguish what belongs to us from what belongs to someone else. Boundaries protect what matters. Relationships keep us from practicing ministry alone. Prayer reconnects us with the source of our vocation. Rest and recreation restore capacities that ministry consumes. Attention to sleep, nutrition, movement, and physical health reminds us that our bodies are not separate from our spiritual and emotional lives. Systems awareness helps us remain grounded when congregations become anxious. Reflection and discernment help us recognize when something needs to change.

These are not techniques for making us invulnerable.

They are practices that help us remain available to God, to others, and to ourselves.

Self-Giving, Not Self-Erasure

Christian ministry involves sacrifice.

There will be nights when someone is dying and sleep will have to wait. There will be seasons when the needs of a congregation require more from us than usual. Love costs something. Vocation costs something. Following Christ has never promised a life protected from sacrifice.

The question is not whether ministry will ask something of us.

It will.

The more important question is what kind of sacrifice faithfulness requires.

Jesus' life was profoundly self-giving, but it was not indiscriminately available. He withdrew to pray. He rested. He received food and hospitality. He lived in relationship with companions. He left places where people were still looking for him. He sometimes moved toward one need while passing by another. The existence of a genuine need did not, by itself, determine what he was called to do.

That matters for pastors.

People may genuinely need us and yet their need may not always be ours to meet. Someone may be disappointed by a boundary we establish without that boundary being unfaithful. Rest may sometimes be more faithful than another meeting. Prayer may take us away from people who want our attention precisely because we need to remember whose ministry this is.

Christian ministry calls us to self-giving, not self-erasure.

Resilience helps us give ourselves faithfully without losing the self God has given us to offer.

The distinction matters because suffering itself is not evidence of faithfulness. Exhaustion is not proof of devotion. Being indispensable is not the same as being called. Allowing ourselves to be consumed by every legitimate need around us does not necessarily make us more Christlike.

Faithful sacrifice is ordered toward life.

Sometimes it asks a great deal of us. Sometimes it stretches capacities we did not know we possessed. But resilience helps us recover, learn, mature, and return. It preserves and develops our capacity to love, serve, discern, and give again.

So one question runs quietly beneath every resource in this series:

Is this helping me become more capable of faithful self-giving, or am I simply being consumed?

Start Where You Are

This series is not a training program to complete.

There is no prescribed sequence. There is no expectation that you work through every resource. You may never need some of them.

Begin instead with what is wearing on you now.

Perhaps you need stronger boundaries. Perhaps you need to understand why a particular situation makes you so angry. Maybe you need relationships in which no one needs you to be their pastor. Perhaps you need a way to recover after demanding weeks, or help sorting out what belongs to you and what you have been carrying for someone else.

Perhaps ministry has hurt you and you need to tend the wound.

Perhaps you have stopped doing things that give you joy.

Perhaps your body is telling you something you have been too busy to hear.

Perhaps you are beginning to wonder whether something about your vocation needs to change.

Start there.

Each resource in this series focuses on one dimension of clergy resilience. It is designed to be read in about an hour and practiced for approximately a month.

The reading introduces the practice.

The month is where the learning happens.

You will be invited to notice what happens in ordinary ministry, experiment with a few practices, reflect on what you discover, and gradually decide what is useful enough to carry forward.

There is nothing to complete here.

You are practicing, not performing.

If you miss several days, begin again. If a practice doesn't fit, adapt it. If you discover that the issue you started with isn't really the issue, follow what you are learning.

The purpose is not to become proficient at another program. It is to become more attentive to yourself, your relationships, your vocation, and the presence of God within all of them.

You Were Never Meant to Do This Alone

Personal practices matter, but clergy resilience is not solely an individual responsibility.

Sometimes pastors become depleted because we have developed unhealthy patterns. Sometimes we are depleted because we are serving within unhealthy systems. Often both are true.

No amount of emotional intelligence can make an abusive situation healthy. Better boundaries cannot eliminate every unreasonable expectation. Prayer cannot substitute for sleep. A vacation cannot repair chronic organizational dysfunction. And resilience should never become an excuse for asking clergy to endure circumstances that need to change.

Healthy resilience includes knowing when we need someone else.

A trusted colleague, friend, clergy cohort, coach, spiritual director, therapist, physician, mentor, or denominational leader may sometimes be part of what faithful resilience requires.

Seeking support is not evidence that resilience has failed.

Relationship is one of the ways resilience develops.

One Practice at a Time

You do not need to become perfectly resilient before you can practice healthy ministry.

Resilience develops as we live.

Notice one thing.

Practice one thing.

Pay attention to what changes.

At the end of the month, you may decide to continue the practice. You may choose another resource because something else now needs attention. Or you may simply return to your life and ministry carrying one new capacity with you.

That is enough.

Beginning Here

There are few vocations in which mistakes can feel as personal as they do in ministry.

You forget something important.

You say something in a meeting that lands badly.

You discover that a pastoral decision hurt someone you were trying to help.

You avoid a conversation too long.

You respond defensively to criticism.

You preach a sermon and later wish you had said something differently.

You misread a situation.

You become impatient.

You make a leadership decision that does not work.

Sometimes the mistake is small. Sometimes it is consequential. Sometimes you recognize it yourself. Sometimes someone else points it out—perhaps gently, perhaps angrily, perhaps publicly.

And because pastoral ministry is not merely a job, the distance between I made a mistake and I am a failure can become very short.

Pastors work with sacred things and with people at vulnerable moments in their lives. We know our words matter. We know our behavior matters. We know our decisions affect people and communities. We have accepted a vocation carrying real responsibility.

That responsibility should not be minimized.

But neither should responsibility become condemnation.

Christian faith gives us a richer vocabulary than either defensiveness or shame.

Confession.

Repentance.

Forgiveness.

Amendment.

Reconciliation.

Grace.

These words assume something remarkably realistic about human beings: we will get things wrong.

Christian grace does not begin with the assumption that faithful people never fail. It begins with the recognition that we are finite, imperfect people whom God continues to call, forgive, form, and use.

That includes pastors.

Grace and self-compassion are therefore not ways of avoiding accountability. They make it possible to face our failures truthfully without allowing those failures to become our identity.

The resilient pastor learns to say:

I got this wrong.

without automatically adding:

Therefore, something is fundamentally wrong with me.

That distinction matters. Shame rarely makes us more accountable. More often, it makes us defensive, secretive, frightened, perfectionistic, or desperate to prove that we were right.

Grace gives us enough room to tell the truth.

Grace Is for Pastors Too

Self-compassion can sound suspiciously soft in a vocation built around service.

Pastors are accustomed to extending compassion outward. We understand why the grieving person forgot something. We understand why the exhausted parent became impatient. We understand why someone frightened by a diagnosis did not behave particularly well. We understand that a person can make a poor decision without being reduced to that decision.

We routinely place people's behavior within the larger context of their humanity. Then we turn toward ourselves and sometimes use an entirely different standard.

You should have known better.

A good pastor wouldn't have done that.

How could you have missed this?

You disappointed everyone.

Maybe you aren't very good at this.

We may even baptize that harshness as accountability. But self-condemnation and accountability are not the same thing.

Accountability asks:

What happened?

What was my responsibility?

Who was affected?

What needs repair?

What can I learn?

What needs to change?

Shame asks:

What does this prove about me?

That question can become merciless. Grace interrupts it.

Grace does not say that what happened does not matter. Grace says that what happened does not have the authority to define the whole person.

For Christians, this is more than a psychological technique. It is theological. We live by grace. We proclaim grace. We offer grace at the font and Table, at the hospital bedside and in members' living rooms, from the pulpit and in the counseling appointment, in the church meeting and in the civic square. We remind people who have failed that failure need not have the last word. We accompany people through confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, and new beginnings.

Yet pastors can become strangely reluctant to believe that the grace they proclaim includes them.

Self-compassion begins when we stop treating ourselves as the one person excluded from the mercy of God.

The Practice

This month's practices move through four related movements:

Notice.

Tell the Truth.

Receive Grace.

Learn and Repair.

These are four practices, not four deadlines. You might spend approximately a week with each one. You may discover that one needs considerably longer. You may move forward and then return to an earlier practice because something new has become visible.

There is no prize for keeping the schedule.

You are practicing, not performing.

Practice One: Notice the Voice That Judges You

Before you can practice self-compassion, you need to notice what happens inside you when something goes wrong.

Begin with a recent mistake, criticism, disappointing outcome, or interaction you wish had gone differently. Do not begin with the most painful experience of your ministry. Choose something manageable enough to observe without becoming overwhelmed by it.

Remember what happened. Then notice what you said to yourself afterward. Write the sentences down as accurately as you can.

I should have handled that better.

That was stupid.

They're going to think I'm incompetent.

I always do this.

I should have seen that coming.

I'm terrible at conflict.

Maybe I'm not cut out for this anymore.

Now look carefully at what you wrote. Some statements contain useful information.

"I interrupted her before she finished explaining" is an observation. "I am terrible at pastoral care" is a judgment. "I should have prepared more carefully" may identify something worth learning. "I am an incompetent pastor" turns an event into an identity.

Learning to recognize that difference is part of resilience.

Try This

Divide a journal page into two columns. At the top of one, write What Happened. At the top of the other, write What I Told Myself It Meant.

What happened:

I became defensive when a session member criticized the proposal.

What I told myself it meant:

After all these years, I should be better than this.

Or:

What happened:

I forgot to return an important phone call.

What I told myself it meant:

I'm becoming unreliable.

Do not argue with the second column yet. Just notice it. Awareness comes before change.

Practice Out Loud

Read one of your self-critical statements aloud. Now imagine that a clergy colleague you care about made exactly the same mistake and came to you ashamed of it. Would you say those same words to them?

If not, become curious about the difference. Why does compassion seem appropriate for another imperfect human being but indulgent when directed toward you? Stay with the question. You do not need to answer it immediately.

Practice Two: Tell the Truth Without Becoming the Accusation

Grace requires truth. Sometimes we really did get it wrong.

When that happens, we can be pulled toward one of two responses. One is defensiveness:

They misunderstood me.

They're overreacting.

That's not what I meant.

If they knew everything I was dealing with, they would understand.

The other is self-condemnation:

I ruined everything.

I'm terrible at this.

I can't believe I did that.

One response avoids responsibility. The other enlarges responsibility until the mistake consumes the person who made it. Neither helps us see clearly. Accountability requires something more differentiated.

This is what I did.

This is what I wish I had done differently.

This is what belongs to me.

This is what does not belong to me.

That last sentence matters. Pastoral relationships exist within systems. Other people bring histories, expectations, anxieties, assumptions, conflicts, wounds, and responsibilities of their own.

Self-compassion does not require taking responsibility for everyone in the system. It requires taking responsibility for yourself.

A Truth-Telling Exercise

Return to the situation you identified during the first practice. Complete these sentences:

What actually happened was...

My part in what happened was...

What I wish I had done differently is...

What was not within my control was...

What I do not need to take responsibility for is...

What I may need to apologize for is...

Read what you have written. Now look for two things. Where are you making excuses? Where are you accusing yourself? Try removing both. What remains is often much closer to the truth. And truth is where meaningful accountability begins.

Practice Three: Receive the Grace You Proclaim

Pastors spend much of their lives telling other people that grace is real. Now practice receiving it.

Return to the situation you have been reflecting on. Imagine that another pastor whom you respect came to you and described exactly what you did. They are embarrassed. Perhaps ashamed. Perhaps frightened that the mistake reveals something terrible about them. What would you say?

You probably would not say, “It doesn’t matter.” Because it may matter. You might say, “Yes, I think you got that wrong.” And then perhaps:

But getting something wrong does not make you worthless.

You can apologize.

You can learn from this.

You can repair what you can.

You are still called.

You are still loved.

You are still more than this moment.

Now listen to yourself. Why would those truths apply to another child of God and not to you?

A Spiritual Practice

Place your feet firmly on the floor. Take several slow breaths. Name what happened before God without explanation. No defense. No prosecution. Simply tell the truth.

God of mercy,
 help me see myself truthfully—
 neither better nor worse than I am.
 Give me courage to own what is mine,
 wisdom to release what is not,
 grace to make repair where I can,
 and humility to receive the mercy
 I so readily proclaim to others.
 Amen.

Sit quietly for a few moments. Do not solve anything. Practice receiving.

Grace is not something you earn by completing the repair successfully. Grace is what allows you to enter the work of repair without having to defend your worth.

Practice Four: Learn and Repair

Grace is not the end of accountability. It makes accountability possible.

Once we no longer need to prove that we are blameless—or prove that we are terrible—we become freer to ask:

What is this experience trying to teach me?

Perhaps you need to listen longer before responding. Perhaps you need to prepare differently. Perhaps you need to ask for help sooner. Perhaps you need better boundaries. Perhaps you need to stop responding to difficult emails late at night. Perhaps you need to recognize a trigger that repeatedly makes you defensive. Perhaps you need to apologize.

Learning transforms failure into formation.

Practice the Repair

If another person was harmed, consider what repair requires. A useful apology usually does not begin with an explanation.

I realize that what I said hurt you. I am sorry. I wish I had handled that differently.

Or:

I made that decision without listening carefully enough to your concerns. I understand why that was frustrating. I am sorry.

Then stop. Allow the apology to stand before explaining anything else. Where appropriate, ask: Is there something I can do that would help repair what happened?

Repair may involve changed behavior rather than more words. Let your future actions become part of the apology.

When Repair Requires More Than You

Sometimes you will take responsibility. You will apologize. You will attempt repair. You will change your behavior. And the relationship will remain stuck.

This can be especially painful when the conflict involves a congregation you have loved and served. Remember that pastoral relationships are relationships. Responsibility exists on both sides.

You are responsible for owning what is yours, making appropriate apology, attempting repair, and changing behavior where change is needed. You are not responsible for controlling whether another person receives your apology. Nor can you create reconciliation by yourself.

There are times when a congregation, session, staff, or group needs help examining its own responsibilities within the pastoral relationship. Do not try indefinitely to make that case yourself. Seek help.

A presbytery leader, Commission on Ministry representative, coach, mediator, consultant, moderator, or other trusted third party may be able to help pastor and congregation consider what accountability, grace, forgiveness, and repair require from everyone involved.

There are also situations involving abuse, exploitation, serious boundary violations, fiduciary misconduct, or other significant ethical breaches where formal accountability is necessary. Grace does not eliminate consequences or replace appropriate ecclesial processes.

But neither should every human mistake become an unforgivable offense.

Grace is not something congregations hire pastors to proclaim on their behalf. It is a practice of the whole Body of Christ.

Sometimes resilience means recognizing that you have done what faithfulness requires of you and that the next faithful action belongs to someone else.

Learning to Release

There is one final practice. After reflection, accountability, apology, repair, and learning, there comes a time when continuing to punish yourself accomplishes nothing.

Ask yourself:

Have I told the truth?

Have I taken responsibility for what is mine?

Have I apologized where apology was needed?

Have I attempted appropriate repair?

Have I learned something that will change how I practice ministry?

If the answer is yes, consider one more question:

What would it mean to release this now?

Release does not mean forgetting. It does not mean pretending nothing happened. It means refusing to use yesterday's failure as today's instrument of punishment.

Write down what you have learned. Then finish this sentence:

Because of this experience, next time I want to...

Keep the learning. Release the condemnation.

Reflection

At the end of your time with these practices, look back over what you have written.

- What kinds of mistakes are hardest for you to forgive in yourself?
- Whose voice do you hear when you criticize yourself?
- What standards do you hold yourself to that you would never impose upon another pastor?
- When does accountability become shame for you?
- When does self-protection become defensiveness?
- What helps you tell the truth without condemning yourself?
- Where have you experienced genuine grace after failure?
- What have your mistakes taught you that success never could?
- What would change in your ministry if you genuinely believed that imperfection did not disqualify you from faithful service?

A Word for the Journey

You will make mistakes in ministry. Some will be small. Some will embarrass you. Some will hurt. Some may require apology, repair, changed behavior, or difficult conversations. There may even be moments you wish you could live again. You cannot. But you can learn from them.

The goal of resilient ministry is not to become a pastor who never gets anything wrong. Such a pastor does not exist.

The goal is to become a pastor who can recognize a mistake without hiding from it, tell the truth without being destroyed by it, repair what can be repaired, learn what can be learned, and continue faithfully.

The grace you proclaim is not merely a theological resource entrusted to you for the sake of other people. It is God's gift to you as well.

You are responsible for your ministry. You are responsible for your choices. You are responsible for learning and growing. But you are not required to become flawless before you are worthy of grace. You never were.

Grace begins precisely there.

And perhaps one of the most resilient things a pastor can learn to say is simply:

I got that wrong.

I am sorry.

I have learned something.

I will try to do better.

And I will not make this failure the definition of who I am.