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Overcoming the Superman Syndrome: Meeting needs while ignoring our own.

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As the wheels of my car jumped the curb, the jolt awakened me, and I saw a palm tree looming in my path. I slammed the brakes as my car smashed into the tree. Emerging from the wreck, I thanked God that He had protected me from injury.

The schedule I had created for myself led to this accident. For years I had set my alarm clock for 4:50 a.m., when I had dragged myself out of bed and dressed. By 5:00 a.m., I was sitting at my desk for devotions, and then I worked for a few hours. Often my mind failed to engage and the time passed unproductively.

I had convinced myself that I could function adequately on no more than six hours of sleep. After all, as a pastor with many important responsibilities, couldn't I accomplish more by sleeping less? Often during the day I felt sluggish, drowsy. Rarely did I work effectively. And occasionally as I drove, my eyes would momentarily close.

Now I realize that much of this was symptomatic of the "Superman Syndrome." This common affliction of ministers consists of the failure to recognize our human needs and limitations, while seeking to meet the needs of others. I believed, "It's up to me to meet the needs of the members and the church. Furthermore, the world is perishing, and I've got to do everything possible to save as many as possible. So I've got to keep pushing." Ironically, I accomplished less than if I had accepted my humanness.

For years I did not recognize the symptoms of the Superman Syndrome as they manifested themselves in my daily life. Also, while my motives sounded noble, I learned that other forces lurked just beneath the surface. What are the symptoms, consequences, and causes of this syndrome? And what can spiritual leaders do to overcome it?

Symptoms

A basic symptom is the desire to make everyone happy. We want to live up to people's images and expectations, however

unrealistic. So we strive to meet all of their needs and find it hard to say No to any requests.

In our own minds we may create and strive to maintain an image of ourselves as heroic problem solvers. We see ourselves as the extraordinary person, maybe even a little "messianic," who is less vulnerable to personal needs than other people are. Rescuing others from their plight makes us feel good about ourselves.

In our compulsion to meet every need in the church, our time is progressively squeezed until there is none left for anything but "the work." Gradually we discard the needs that every normal human being has. We can simply do without. We repress our needs for adequate rest, play, spiritual renewal, and personal growth. Taking time to enjoy the scenery is a luxury rarely indulged. We deceive ourselves into thinking that we don't need nurturing. In denying our humanness we live behind the mask of self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, we hide our true selves, fearing that our weaknesses and struggles will be discovered. One writer observes, "We try to disguise ourselves as Superman, but beneath the surface, we are really only Clark Kent. Is it any wonder that we won't pull open the buttons on our shirt to let people see who we really are?"

Also, frustration takes residence. For no matter how hard we try, we will disappoint some people. We simply cannot meet everyone's expectations-especially when they conflict. Nor can we be the perfect person we strive to be. Despite our best efforts, a sense of hypocrisy and guilt intrudes. Our sense of unmet needs only adds to our frustration.

Consequences

What consequences result from the Superman Syndrome? As expectations and demands increase, fatigue builds. That's why I crashed into a tree. On another occasion I experienced severe nausea and weakness for days as my body rebelled against the demands I placed on it.

In our weariness and frustration, we begin to resent those we help. As they become a burden we grimly bear, joy ebbs from our hearts, and it's often replaced by anger.

Buried in human demands and needs, we fail to maintain spiritual health through intimacy with God. Gradually we lose a keen sense

of divine calling and the spiritual energy it inspires. Though outwardly we may still appear to be effective, spiritually we dry and wither.

Emotional burnout results from spending our inner reserves without replenishing ourselves spiritually and personally. It also arises from our frustrating inability to live up to our Superman image.

Finally, we neglect our families. In theory we know they are our first and most important ministry, but in practice, we fail to live this out. In trying to meet the needs and expectations of others, we don't have adequate time for them. "They'll understand," we repeatedly rationalize, "and one day when my schedule is less hectic I'll make it up to them." This can eventually lead to their alienation from us, and even from God. My problem contributed to my older daughter's enduring a rocky adolescence before her life turned around.

Why we want to be Superman

While the importance and urgency of God-given tasks served as my rational, conscious motivation, I gradually came to realize that four unconscious forces formed a powerful undercurrent shaping my behavior just as powerfully. If strong enough, just one of these can trigger the Superman Syndrome.

First, the low self-esteem, which I had suffered since youth, generated two unhealthy dynamics: It created an acute need for approval, so I craved acceptance and appreciation by others, and liked to think of myself as the hero who rescued them. This sense of inferiority drove me to strive for success in order to prove to myself that I had value as a person. Unfortunately, the anesthetic of achievement only temporarily numbed the pain, before I needed another dose. In reality, then, my desire to be Superman stemmed from feeling like "sub-par man."

Second, we may possess an erroneous theology that causes us to believe that God's servants are not to consider their own needs and wants-or at least put them too far down on the list of priorities. To attend to these, we think, would be selfish. In this kind of theology, the beautiful reality of "dying to self" becomes a matter of killing ourselves.

Compounding the syndrome is our legitimate desire for significance- wrongly pursued. God created us to love and obey Him, and to serve Him according to our individual gifts, opportunities, and calling. In this we find our own highest

purpose and fulfillment, especially as we do our best and leave the results in God's hands. As in my case, the problem arises when we equate significance with outward achievement. I mistakenly thought that the more I worked and accomplished for God, the more valuable my life would be.

Finally, in some cases of the Superman Syndrome a more subtle force is the fear of dependence, which results from several childhood conditions. Some have had overly controlling or protective parents—which I experienced. As adults we fear that depending on others will lead to the further smothering of our spirits. So we decide that we do not need the nurture of others.

Taking off our capes

Trying to be more than we are results in being less than we could be. How can we resign the role of Superman (or Superwoman) to live a more balanced and God-honoring life? With God's help, we can take the following steps to remove our capes.

First, we need to recognize our human needs. Like everyone else we get tired, frustrated, and wounded. We need refreshing and renewing of mind, body, and spirit. As leaders under special stress, we much need the love, support, and encouragement of family and friends. If we have difficulty seeking and accepting these, we need to discover why.

Second, we must place a priority on nurturing our relationship with God. Not only is He the source of our joy and strength, but our only means of bearing lasting spiritual fruit. "'I am the vine,'" Jesus said, "'you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing'" (John 15:5, NIV).

Third, we need to reveal our humanness to others. By doing so, we make it harder to pretend to ourselves or others. Bill Hybels, as the pastor of a megachurch, has consistently tried to be open with his staff and congregation, eliminating any pretense of perfection. Because this enables others to identify with him, it actually gives him more credibility and enhances the effectiveness of his ministry.

Fourth, we need to consciously do our best and leave the results to God. One of my professors at seminary shared his experience in counseling a suicidal woman for hours late into the evening. Around midnight he told her, "I'm going home and going to bed. If you're still alive in the morning, we'll talk some more." Was he callous? No. He realized that he had done all he could to

help, and that it was not up to him to solve everyone's problems. The woman survived.²

While emergencies arise which demand exhausting hours, this should not become the standard practice in ministry. In getting enough rest I actually find myself far more productive and creative in my ministry. I can do more, do it better, and do it much more joyfully.

Fifth, we need to practice what we preach-that God is in control of our lives. We are to serve faithfully, believing that it is not up to us but God to prosper our ministries in the ways He chooses (1 Cor. 3:6-8).

Finally, we need to make ourselves accountable to trusted individuals, who know us well enough to discourage us whenever the urge arises to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

Jesus reminds those who find Superman's cape heavy, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:30). We need to hear God say to us, "Lighten up! You don't have to save the world. Only my Son can do that. You're not the Savior; you're not even Superman. Take off your cape!" w

1 Jack Kuhatschek, Superman Syndrome (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1995),159.

2 Ray Anderson, Fuller Theological Seminary.