

Message: Healthy or Unhealthy Soul¹

If I were to ask you what the word “soul” means, what would you say? It’s not easy to define. We find references to soul all around us.

- “May God rest his/her soul”
- Bruce Willis in the movie “The Sixth Sense.”
- Remember childhood prayer?
*Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.*
- How much does a soul weigh? A physician tried to find out 100 years ago. Weighed 7 terminal patients before and right after death. Determined that soul weighed 21 grams. Debunked.
- Philosopher Owen Flanagan, “*De-souling is the primary operation of the scientific image.*”² There’s no room for the soul in science.
- Lori N. tried to sell her soul for \$2,000 on eBay. No takers. “No soul selling policy.” If souls don’t exist, don’t allow selling of nonexistent items. If souls do exist, people can’t sell their parts. Leaves open the question on delivery.
- S.O.S. – universal sign for help. “Save Our Souls”

For those who enjoy word study, the word soul comes from Greek word *psyche* (ψυχή). It can be translated as spirit. If it sounds familiar, it’s the root word for psychology. The Hebrew word we associate most with soul is *ruach* (רוּחַ). It’s translated as breath, wind or spirit.

- Genesis 1:1-3. The Spirit of God moved over the waters and Light was created.
- Genesis 2:6-7. God formed us from soil and blew the breath of life into us. We became living souls!
- Genesis 6:3. God says, “*I’m not going to breathe life into men and women endlessly. Eventually they’re going to die; from now on they can expect a life span of 120 years.*”

¹ Some material drawn from John Ortberg, *Soulkeeping*, Zondervan, 2014

²*Ibid*, p. 29

What do we picture when we think of the soul?

Some of us may have a Looney Tunes picture of the soul. You know, the ghostly, white image of Daffy Duck – complete with wings and a harp, who would talk to Bugs Bunny after being blown up by dynamite. Or perhaps Obi-Wan in Star Wars. It may seem strange to talk about cartoons, but Aristotle said, “*The soul never thinks without a picture.*”³

What is the soul? As the expression goes, “*it may be hard to define, but I know it when I see it.*” During Jesus’ time, people wondered if they were seeing Jesus’ soul after his resurrection. That’s why he ate a piece of fish and let the disciples touch him after suddenly appearing among them in the room (Luke 24:40-43).

The musician John Legend said, “*Soul is about authenticity. Soul is about finding the things in your life that are real and pure.*” That’s good. It’s a lot closer. It puts us on a path of discovery. It helps us to look deeper.

Pat’s story. Jeffrey Boyd is a Renaissance man. He’s a Yale psychiatrist, ordained minister and co-author of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. (footnote: the word “soul” does not appear in the text). Dr. Boyd works to re-inject the word soul into our scientific vocabulary. He argues that we see people who have a strength of soul that will not be lessened by the condition of their body.

Dr. Boyd tells the story of a woman named Patricia. She suffered from diabetes, a heart attack and two strokes. Patricia went blind, suffered renal failure (requiring dialysis) and had both her legs amputated – all while she was in her thirties! She lived in a nursing home, except for hospital visits, frequently going into comas that would last one or two weeks.

Patricia was part of a church in Washington, D.C. that wanted to create a homeless shelter. They couldn’t find anyone willing to lead, so she volunteered. In between dialysis, amputations and comas, she pulled together a team. They got zoning laws changed, architectural plans drawn up and fundraising done. Then Pat helped the team figure

³ *Ibid*

out the rules for the homeless people who used the shelter, and she recruited and trained the staff who ran it.

When Pat died after the shelter’s first year of successful operations, homeless people, members of congress and U.S. Cabinet members, including Secretary of State James Baker stood next to one another at the funeral. The soul knows a glory that the body cannot rob. In some ways and cases, the more the body revolts, the more the soul shines through. Pat once said, “*The only thing I can depend on with my body is that it will fail me. Somehow my body is mine, but it’s not ‘me.’*”⁴

Let me offer one view of the soul for our time together. It comes from theologian Dallas Willard, based on Luke 10:25-27. “*What must we do to have eternal life? ...love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself*” Pastor John Ortberg writes about it in his book, Soulkeeping.⁵ To learn about the soul, we have to know about the parts of our inner life, represented by three concentric circles:

- **Human Will** (inner circle). Our capacity to choose. It’s what makes us a person and not a thing. God gave it to us. That’s what “*exercise dominion*” means in Genesis 1:26. Will is central, but it’s limited. Will is good at large or simple decisions, but bad at trying to override bad habits or patterns. If we try to improve our soul by willpower, we’ll soon be exhausted.
- **Mind** (next circle). This refers to our thoughts and feelings, all the ways we’re conscious of things. Thoughts and feelings are flowing through us all the time, mostly in habitual patterns that willpower alone can’t redirect consistently. When we think thoughts that are false or unworthy, or when we entertain desires that are opposite to what God want for our lives, we damage our soul. Paul said, “*The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace*” (Romans 8:6, CEB). Our minds crave peace.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 30

⁵ *Ibid*, pp.

- **Body** (outer circle). Our body is like a little country. It’s the one place in the universe where our wills have a chance to be in charge. Our bodies are like little power packs. We wouldn’t be us without them. They’re filled with all kinds of appetites and habits. For things like tying our shoes or driving, our will and mind turn control over to our bodies. It’s when we’re on autopilot. Ever heard the term “muscle memory”? That’s the idea.

Our soul is all of these entities (encompassing circle). We aren’t just our body or mind or will. We’re the sum. That’s our soul. Dallas Willard says, “*The soul is the capacity to integrate all the parts into a single, whole life.*”⁶ Our soul is like the program that runs a computer or smartphone. It keeps everything going. We don’t really notice it until it messes up.

That’s why “integrity” is a deep soul word. Our soul seeks to integrate our will and our mind and our body into a whole person. Our soul also seeks to connect us with other people, with creation and with the God who created us. Jesus made us to be, and to remain, connected to him in the same way a tree is rooted by a life-giving stream.

Your soul is the deepest part of you. It is also your whole person. Your soul is what brings your intentions, your thoughts and feelings, your values and conscience, and your body – face, language and actions, together. Our soul is healthy or well-ordered when there’s harmony between our three inner entities and God’s will. When you’re connected with God and other people in life, you have a healthy soul.

What’s an unhealthy soul? According to Dallas Willard, “*an unhealthy soul is one that experiences disintegration, and sin causes the disintegration of the soul.*”⁷

Jesus went to work on his disciples. “*Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself,*

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 42

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 43

your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?” (Matt. 16:24-26).

Jesus is giving us a soul diagnosis. When our inner being is disrupted, our relationship to others is usually broken and we’re disconnected from God. We find ourselves living at odds to the way God made life to be. When we find ourselves in that situation, we won’t be satisfied acquiring the whole world. Little has meaning. Nothing seems good to us.

When we lose our soul, it means we no longer have a healthy center that organizes and guides our lives. It’s like sitting in a car on the freeway without a steering wheel. It doesn’t matter how fast or slow we go, we’re a crash waiting to happen.

This is the problem that challenges our world today. We live on a planet of lost souls. It’s the human condition. We’re unsatisfied, unhappy with the condition of our lives. Rather than looking inward, at our own soul, we focus on others. If only my spouse would If only my kids would If only my boss would If only my parents would If only I weren’t God knows what battles we’re fought. God wants us to know that life isn’t about the things on the surface. It’s about what lies deeper, in our inner world.

How is it with your soul?

Remember the woman named Patricia who had the beautiful soul?

What Dr. Jeffrey Boyd didn’t write was that Patricia was his wife. Watching her body crumble, he saw something deeper than a body shine. Later, he wrote, *“If a child is born with such withered legs that there will never be the possibility of walking or crawling, [is] the child’s soul limited by these architectural disasters of the spine, pelvis and femur? I had a son born with precisely these deformities. His name was Justin. That son also died.”*⁸

We search for the soul because we’re curious. The search for the soul begins with out greatest hurt.

“If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take ...”

⁸ *Ibid*

Let us pray ...

Lord, thank you for making us the way we are. Thank you for giving us bodies, minds and the freedom to choose. Thank you for our soul, that deep, mysterious part of us that always reaches out, seeking a connection with you. Help us to embrace your love and grace. Teach us to trust you and to love so that our soul may be healthy. Unite our will, mind and body in our love for you, for each other and for those we do not yet know. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Job 30:24-31 (The Message) – ever feel this way?

“What did I do to deserve this?

Did I ever hit anyone who was calling for help?

Haven't I wept for those who live a hard life,
been heartsick over the lot of the poor?

But where did it get me?

I expected good but evil showed up.

I looked for light but darkness fell.

My stomach's in a constant churning, never settles down.

Each day confronts me with more suffering.

I walk under a black cloud. The sun is gone.

I stand in the congregation and protest.

I howl with the jackals,

I hoot with the owls.

I'm black-and-blue all over,

burning up with fever.

My fiddle plays nothing but the blues;
my mouth harp wails laments.”

Matthew 10:27-31 (The Message)

“Don't be intimidated. Eventually everything is going to be out in the open, and everyone will know how things really are. So don't hesitate to go public now.

Don't be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. There's nothing they can do to your soul, your core being. Save your fear for God, who holds your entire life - body and soul - in his hands.

What's the price of a pet canary? Some loose change, right? And God cares what happens to it even more than you do. He pays even greater attention to you, down to the last detail - even numbering the hairs on your head! So don't be intimidated by all this bully talk. You're worth more than a million canaries.”