

Message: The Soul Experiment¹

As we begin today, I want to take a moment to review our series on “How is it with your soul?” Life happens and we may have missed some steps along the journey. We began with the story of Debra and Perc. In the grasp of addiction, they felt a “divine gravity” drawing them away from temptation and across the threshold to a new life, a life devoted to caring for others. Their souls were touched by God’s grace. That was our starting point.

Together, we began to explore a private world. We don’t often pull the curtain back and look at the deeper things in our life. It’s scary. We’re touching on places where darkness lives in us. “We stopped looking for the monsters under the bed when we realized they were inside us.”² God is present too, but sometimes we struggle because the light seems too bright to bear, too unreal or out of reach. We think “I’ve done too many things” or “Who would want me?” So we hide, believing that what’s out of sight is out of mind. We’re safe. We’re just delaying the inevitable.

Where our journey has taken us:

- **What’s a soul?** One picture, based on Jesus’ words:
“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” (Luke 10:25-27.)
- **Your soul isn’t what’s left after we die.** It’s who we are, here and now! *“The most important thing about you isn’t the things you achieve. It’s the person you become”* – Dallas Willard.
- **The condition of our souls.** A lost soul is a ruined soul. That’s not a destination, it’s a diagnosis offered by, Jesus, who said, *“I came so that [you] could have life - indeed, so that [you] could live life to the fullest. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”* (John 10:10b-11).

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

² *The Joker* (Heath Ledger), *The Dark Knight*,

- **A wounded soul is a soul with unmet needs.** Unmet need is like a sinkhole in our soul. Sin erodes our inner being over time until one day we collapse, revealing our wounds.
- **Thomas Aquinas teaches us,** “*There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning.*” We’re made to need God. Sadly, we either fill those needs with selfish desires or we lose sight of what it means to really, truly love God. Thomas Aquinas: “*The things that we love tell us what we are.*” That picture isn’t a pretty one.
- **Jesus asks the question,** “*Do you truly love me?*” (John 21:16). Peter replied, “*I’m fond of you*” (v17). Jesus restored Peter and called him to lead, teach and care for others. How do you respond?

That leads us to today. We’re going to talk about how to meet the need within us and answer Jesus’ question at the same time.

As an example, let me ask a question: Are you lonely? You aren’t alone. Mother Teresa once said “*the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible form of poverty.*”³ She described loneliness as the modern day equivalent to leprosy. Loneliness is a symptom of a needy soul.

The global health firm Cigna released a study of 20,000 American adults in May 2018. “They found that almost half (46%) of us sometimes or always feel lonely or left out. Other results:

- **Two in five** of us (43%) feel our relationships aren’t meaningful and we’re isolated from others.
- **One in four** of us (27%) rarely or never feel as though there are people who really understand us.
- **One in five** of us (20%) report they rarely feel close to people or feel like there are people we can talk to.

A few, specific findings include:

- **Single parents or guardians** – even though you live with children, you’re more likely to be lonely.

³ Corrie Cutrer, *The Loneliness Epidemic, Today’s Christian Woman*, 2014

- **Only around half of Americans (53%)** have meaningful in-person social interactions on a daily basis, spending quality time with family or a friend.
- **Generation Z (adults ages 18-22) is the loneliest generation** and claims to be in worse health than older generations.
- By itself, social media use is not a predictor of loneliness.”⁴

Connie Kinder, a Christian therapist, says “85-90% of her clients wrestle with loneliness.”⁵ In addition to having a private practice, Connie works at a local counseling center. No matter whether we’re rich or poor, young or old, male or female, loneliness touches all people. Loneliness shows itself in different ways: anxiety, depression or anger.

The core issue? The pain of not being connected in a meaningful relationship; that’s what hurts most.

Even though loneliness is something most of us wrestle with, almost no one wants to address it openly. Pastor John Ortberg, who has publically admitted the deep, secret loneliness he felt when he was younger, says this: *“People will readily acknowledge being too busy because that makes them sound important. But to say ‘I’m lonely’ is kind of like saying ‘I’m a loser,’ and nobody’s going to like a loser.”*⁶ Let me be clear: you aren’t a loser. You’re needy.

Loneliness is one of the symptoms of a needy soul. Other symptoms are (1) difficulty making decisions, (2) the feeling that we’re always vulnerable to other people or circumstances, (3) lack of patience, (4) we’re easily thrown off track, and (5) we find our identity in external things. Rather than being centered in God, we try to control our life. We end up defining ourselves by our accomplishments, physical appearance, title or job, or our important friends. We lose jobs, retire, get older and friends move away. When we that happens, we can lose our identity.⁷ Anything that becomes more important than God confuses our soul.

⁴ <https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/>

⁵ *Op cit, Cutrer*

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *Op cit., Ortberg, pp. 100-103*

Our soul defines our identity. You’re the keeper of your soul. It’s your responsibility to help your soul become healthy, to figure out who you are. When you do, your relationship with others will be healthier. You won’t be anxious. Your mind will be at peace. You’ll find your life less hurried and more balanced. You’ll be free from guilt over your failure to be perfect. You’ll be more patient and loving with others. You’ll worry less about what others think or what happens at work, school or at that family gathering. That’s because you’ll be more self-confident and assured of who you are. You are God’s child!

A healthy soul is a soul centered on God. That’s how we were designed. Our needs point us to God, who wants to be in a relationship with us. That means we’re never truly alone. Once we learn God is for us, we’ll find ways to rest and the courage to be in relationship with other people. That’s the true cure for loneliness.

How can we be “with God”? It’s the key to having a centered soul. Let’s admit one thing: God has the greater part. That’s what grace is. We do have a part to play in developing a healthy relationship with God.

God walked with Joseph. That’s where “with God” gets interesting. Joseph was a proud boy. So much so, his brothers all despised him. In fact, they disliked him so much they threw him in a pit and then sold him to the Egyptians as a slave. Joseph had a tough life. We learn that “*the Lord was with Joseph*” in slavery and then in prison (Genesis 39:2). God brought Joseph out of prison, made him a successful businessman and eventually restored his relationship to his family.

When our soul is present with God, it doesn’t matter whether you are a dishwasher or CEO, a Millennial or a Boomer, single, married or divorced, in prison, a slave or free. Our soul doesn’t depend on our status or achievement but on simply being with God.

Guess what? It’s our turn. We, as ordinary people living in today’s world, can find a way to live with Jesus. We can find life with God.

I have news: there’s no magic formula.

Pastor John Ortberg offers a simple test we can all try. It’s called the Soul Experiment. It’s a simple way of focusing our soul on God throughout the day. I invite you to try it for a week. Begin each day by challenging yourself: *how many moments of my life can I fill with conscious awareness of, and surrender to, God’s presence?* Then deliberately imagine yourself doing that at home, at work, in the car, when you’re online, when you’re watching TV, when you’re in meetings, when you’re with others.⁸

The test is to see how to live “with God” all the time. Can you keep God in your heart and mind all the time, regardless of what you’re doing?

It isn’t easy! Here’s a picture of how it works for me. This week I was in the office for an hour on Monday and I interacted with our office team. It wasn’t pretty. I apologize. When I left, I realized I had failed the test. I didn’t listen or think about God a single time in that hour. As I drove home, I was grouching in my spirit because I felt like there was too much to do and I wasn’t feeling the respect I felt I deserved.

Do you ever have that kind of thought? I was feeling hurried, impatient and a bit out of sort. I’m bit ashamed to admit it, but it’s true.

Then this thought came to me: how would I look at the next day? The hours would pass, whether I was with God or without God. I could continue to go through each day without God and feel stressed, angry, sorry for myself, impatient, and be a pain in the neck to everyone around me. I can choose to live that way.

Or I could choose to live those hours with God. I could be glad I’m alive. I could be grateful for the life I live. I could be filled with joy because of what I get to do. I could recognize that God, not me, is running the universe. In fact, God was doing pretty well with things before I was born and will probably be able to manage whether I get my To Do list done or not.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 120-121 – material drawn from his illustration

What’s it going to be? Live with or without Jesus? When you look at life that way, doesn’t it make sense to say, “*Yes, God, I want to live life with you. My soul needs you more than it needs my frustration and impatience.*” Life with God isn’t a life filled with more religious activities or devotions or trying to be good. It’s the life of inner peace and contentment for your soul with the maker and manager of the universe. Life without God is the opposite. It’s death. It will kill your soul.

What’s it like when our soul is with God? It’s great! God wants to make every moment of our life glorious with God’s presence. This is the win. It’s the cheddar. It’s the core of eternal life, of living life to it’s fullest. That kind of life isn’t reserved for super-spiritual people or the saints of the church. It’s what God wants for every one of us. It’s the whole point of tending to our soul.

Most of us, as Christians, spend our energy and worry trying not to sin. The goal isn’t to try to sin less. In all our efforts to keep from sinning, what are we focusing on? Sin. God wants us to focus on Jesus. To be with him. Jesus said, “*I am the vine, you are the branches ... abide with me*” (John 15:1-5). Abide means “stay connected” or “remain.” “*Be with me*” is what Jesus tells us. Just relax and learn to enjoy God’s presence. Surrender to it. No guilt, no stress, no deadlines or penalties, no extra lines on our face or pounds around our waistline. That’s easy!

How many moments of each day can you live with God? As many as you choose! Start where you are and go from there. God will help. After all, God wants to be with you every moment of every day, 365 days of the year, for all the years of your life – now and through eternity.

Spiritual things aren’t challenging. They give life. As Jesus said, “*Don’t worry, for my yoke is easy and the burden is light*” (Matthew 11:30).

Give it a try. Your soul will be glad you did.

Deuteronomy 30:5-7 (The Message)

No matter how far away you end up, GOD, your God, will get you out of there and bring you back to the land your ancestors once possessed. It will be yours again. He will give you a good life and make you more numerous than your ancestors.

GOD, your God, will cut away the thick calluses on your heart and your children’s hearts, freeing you to love GOD, your God, with your whole heart and soul and live, really live. GOD, your God, will put all these curses on your enemies who hated you and were out to get you.

Matthew 12:43-45 (The Message)

When a defiling evil spirit is expelled from someone, it drifts along through the desert looking for an oasis, some unsuspecting soul it can bedevil. When it doesn’t find anyone, it says, “I’ll go back to my old haunt.” On return it finds the person spotlessly clean, but vacant. It then runs out and rounds up seven other spirits more evil than itself and they all move in, whooping it up. That person ends up far worse off than if he’d never gotten cleaned up in the first place.

That’s what this generation is like: You may think you have cleaned out the junk from your lives and gotten ready for God, but you weren’t hospitable to my kingdom message, and now all the devils are moving back in.