

Message: Our Needy Soul¹

Your soul is like a sinkhole. I’ll bet you never heard that before! I had an interesting time looking sinkholes this week. It’s amazing what you can find online. Sinkholes come in all shapes and sizes. They all have the same, basic cause. Water has eroded the underlying structure over time. You can’t tell by looking until, one day, a specific combination of factors happens, and there’s a shift. What appeared to be stable, whole and dependable collapses, revealing a hole. A sinkhole will draw other material and anyone nearby into it, continuing to collapse until it’s filled – at least temporarily.

That sounds like a person with a wounded soul. Everything seems fine until one day when a collapse occurs. Other people and things are drawn into the situation until the wound is bandaged. But it’s a temporary fix; there are deeper issues that need to be addressed.

Our souls are like sinkholes because they’re needy. A sinkhole in the earth needs things of the earth to fill it. Our souls are like sinkholes because we have desires that need to be filled. We have spiritual needs that are unfilled. The Hebrew word for soul in this case is *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ). It implies a needy person, a person battling with two challenges: our limits and our expectations.

Our first challenge is that we have limits. We’re limited in every way: in our intelligence, strength, energy and morality. There are so many ways we try to fool others and ourselves. We apply topical treatments to make us appear younger, even as we get older. We buy products to make us thinner, even as we get fatter. We read self-help books to help us feel better, even though we keep on following self-destructive habits and patterns. We invest in medications and systems to prolong our life, knowing we’re going to die. We sacrifice quality of life for quantity and temporary things in life.

Author Kent Dunnington wrote, “We’re limited in every way but one: we have unlimited desire.”² Sounds like a sinkhole waiting to happen.

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

² *Ibid*, p. 82

Our second challenge is our expectations. We always want more: more time, more wisdom, more beauty, more funny videos on YouTube, etc. And that’s not counting the “big three” – money, power and fame. For example, one of the latest trends that indicates importance is busyness. If you *aren’t* getting texts or calls during an evening meal with your significant others or at all hours of the day, seven days a week, then you must not be important (or at least self-important.)

Spiritual advisors, including John Wesley, have a different view. “*Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day. We must eliminate hurry from our life.*”³

We all have problems with our limitations and expectations. That’s the human condition. We have problems because we deny, ignore or pass on to others things that are really our responsibility. The care of your soul is your responsibility. No one else can take care of it. Ignoring our responsibility only postpones the day when a collapse will come, revealing a hole in our carefully manufactured façade.

That’s when our wounded soul is revealed, crying out. The problem with our soul isn’t with its neediness. God made us that way. Thomas Aquinas said, “*There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning.*”⁴ Our needs are meant to point the way to God. There are two things that get in the way. First, instead of turning to God, we choose to fill our minds, bodies and wills with anything else. The habits and patterns of our minds and bodies are well-established.

We have another problem: we often don’t know what our souls are truly devoted to. Most people, especially religious people, would probably say their souls are devoted to God or a higher calling or an ideal. We want to believe that’s true, even as we devote our souls to something else.

Let’s do a little experiment on our soul’s devotion. It’s a self-assessment. You don’t need to tell anyone what your answers are.

³ *Ibid*, p. 20

⁴ <https://www.christianquotes.info/quotes-by-author/thomas-aquinas-quotes/?listpage=2&instance=2#participants-list-2>

You’ll see several statements on-screen. Consider them as honestly as possible. If any of them resemble your thoughts even slightly, it’s possible you may have discovered the true devotion of your soul:

- **I think about money a lot.**
I fantasize about winning the lottery. I have a mental wish list of all the things I’d buy if money were no object.
- **I wish I had more control over others.**
It seems like others don’t respect me enough at home, work or church. I know I’d handle it carefully - I just want more power.
- **I missed important family events to pursue my career.**
I justify it by telling my family I need to do it to provide for them. I keep telling myself I’ll get that break - one day.
- **I have desires that I prefer not to have my spouse or others know about.** If I am confronted about any of those desires, I become defensive and try to justify it.
- **I consider myself an honest person, someone with good values.**
But I would set those values aside to pursue something important to me if I knew no one else would know.
- **If my doctor told me I had to give up (alcohol, cigarettes, red meat, salt/sugar, etc.) because it was putting my health at risk,** I would find it difficult to impossible. I wouldn’t want anyone to know.
- **If you asked my family what was most important to me,** they would most likely refer to my job, hobby, money, social media, etc. They would probably not say it was them.
- **I have secrets that I am willing to lie to protect.**
- **I love Jesus, and I want to follow him more closely.** But there’s one thing that always seems to get in the way. It’s _____.

Thomas Aquinas said, “The things that we love tell us who we are.”⁵

⁵ <https://www.christianquotes.info/quotes-by-author/thomas-aquinas-quotes/?listpage=2&instance=2#participants-list-2>

If our soul is devoted to something that becomes more important than God, we’re following a modern day idol. To make things worse, we can’t give up our idol by sheer willpower. That’s like an alcoholic trying to become sober by promising himself he won’t drink anymore. We need help. We need to be honest with ourselves. Most of all, nothing will be effective until we want to change.

That’s what it means to be addicted to our desires, to sin, that corrosive force that digs away at our soul. Our addictions are nice things like food, shopping, recreation, hobbies and pleasure. On the face of it, these aren’t bad. But casual enjoyment can change, slowly and surely, to addiction, if we aren’t careful.

This is where grace comes in. We can’t replace an idol - our addiction to other things, by turning away from it. We have to turn *toward* something. We have to find a new passion. We have to find something outside of ourselves or the things in the world – good as they may be.

There’s hope. Our soul’s infinite capacity to desire is only matched by God’s infinite capacity to give. That’s what grace and love mean.

What if the real reason we feel like we never have enough is that God is not yet finished giving? If you haven’t found joy yet, you need to be willing to accept and receive the love and grace of God – directly and through others. That should be easy. But we make it hard. Our ego gets involved. We want to receive God’s grace, but we want it on our terms. We want it our way.

There’s only one problem: we’re stuck in a sinkhole. We can’t see from outside the sinkhole. God can. We have to trust God. We have to watch for where God sends the Spirit to help us, to guide us to the lifeline that we can grasp onto to get out of our predicament.

That lifeline is Jesus. He helps us in ways we don’t expect. When Peter and the disciples thought they “had it,” Jesus challenged them. The way to find healing for your soul is surrender and self-sacrifice, not self-sufficiency (Matthew 16:23-26; 1 Cor. 12:9-10). That’s the paradox. We can’t heal our own soul. Only God can do that. It takes love and

forgiveness in unconditional measures. That’s what God’s grace gives when we’re ready to accept it.

We have to admit we can’t fill the holes and gaps on our own.

We have to believe in Jesus, trust God and learn to turn to God first. We need forgiveness to remove the corrosive power of sin on our soul.

That’s how we begin to heal. That’s how we’re restored. That’s how we become whole. It’s the way of selfless love. We have to put others first – family, friends, those we meet who are in need. It’s counter-cultural and counter-intuitive, but it’s the way Jesus calls us to follow.

Where does that spiritual path lead us? We don’t have to look far. When we look at Jesus’ disciples, we see two different paths.

- **First is Judas** – the path of betrayal and remorse. He regretted turning Jesus over. The result: suicide. He couldn’t deal with what was revealed. The grass wasn’t greener on the other side of the fence.
- **Second is Peter** – he started on the path of fear. Peter denied knowing Jesus: he was watching out for his own skin! The result: he wept bitterly, ran away and hid out in a room, waiting to see if he would be arrested by the authorities.

But that’s not the end of the story! John captures the story in the 21st chapter of his letter. Peter and the apostles are fishing.

- Three times Jesus asked Peter if he (Peter) “truly loved” him (Jesus). Peter could only say he was “fond” of Jesus.
- The Lord restored Peter, even when he wasn’t “all in.” Jesus gave Peter work to do, caring for others, teaching them and spreading the message of the movement. Peter’s devotion was so great he led, even when it was difficult and threatening, even when it led to his death at the hands of Rome. Peter truly loved Jesus in the end.

What does our love for Jesus look like? Maybe, like Peter, you aren’t “all in” yet.

Jesus asks, “Do you truly love me?” (John 21:16) What will you do? Believe in Jesus. His love and grace are able to fill your desires. Admit you need him. Trust God and really, truly surrender. Make Jesus your

daily need. No holding back! Surrender isn't popular, easy or quick, but it's what heals. It fills the needs of our soul. Jesus will take us as we are and make our souls greater than we can imagine.

I invite you to join me on that spiritual journey. Amen.

Deuteronomy 30:1-5 (The Message)

Here's what will happen. While you're out among the nations where GOD has dispersed you and the blessings and curses come in just the way I have set them before you, and you and your children take them seriously and come back to GOD, your God, and obey him with your whole heart and soul according to everything that I command you today, GOD, your God, will restore everything you lost; he'll have compassion on you; he'll come back and pick up the pieces from all the places where you were scattered. 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.

Matthew 16:23-26 (The Message)

But Jesus didn't swerve. “Peter, get out of my way. Satan, get lost. You have no idea how God works.”

Then 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, 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?