

Series: Ruin to Renovation	Reference: Lk 6:45 / Psalm 1	Title: How's My Soul?	Date: 07.8.18
Website Writeup:			
The soul's formation is seen in how thoughts, feelings, social relations, bodily habits, behaviors, and choices unfold & interact with each other - revealing the overall character of a person - our window to the soul. A soul which is the foundation of who we are, and should draw life & meaning from the Soul of the Creator.			

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Thanks to Dallas Willard, this series is born out of his book, *Renovation of the Heart*. Many of his thoughts & words make it into these sermons; read the book as you follow along.

Today we address the soul's formation which is seen in how thoughts, feelings, social relations, bodily habits, behaviors, and choices unfold & interact with each other - revealing the overall character of a person - our window to the soul. **In Luke 6:45, Jesus speaks of this, "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks."**

Good, or evil, naturally emanate from souls due to how they've been spiritually formed. We say people have good or bad character (less a judgment, as an observation). What's particularly disturbing is, somewhere in our worldview shift around the 1990's, bad character began to be elevated as good. Now we have conflicted characters in movies applauded for their violence & moral liquidity. Villains become heroes.

The movie, *Righteous Kill*, where two cops as partners enjoy a long career with one another, struggle under this contradiction. The one admiring the other as his hero & mentor. But when the Mentor decides to take justice in his own hands the one time in his career & plant evidence on a guilty party who'd gotten off on technicality, his partner takes notice. As a result the partner secretly becomes a serial killer of people he believes are 'guilty' justifying his actions against the one action of his partner. One mistake on a good cops part, which the viewer is led to believe is morally justifiable at the time, leads to more evil in his partner.

Character's important & is formed over many years to varying degrees in people. We know many people find themselves in deep self-conflict at the soul level. We know what it's like to live in self-contradiction, knowing what godly character would call us to do, but not having the desire to do it.

Like our past two sermons, in speaking about assault & withdrawal, we don't want to do those things, but sometimes find ourselves doing them anyway & justifying ourselves in process. We muster will-power not to react to someone in a certain way, but one small word from them & we attack, or go silent. Loving action pawned off for self-justified revenge, or avoidance.

We're all being spiritually formed, the question is, to what end - Christ-likeness, or not? There are the extremes of good & evil. But there's all the rest of us on the spectrum living within a state of self-contradiction. Having thoughts of good intention, at times not seeing it come to fruition, and at others, we do.

The formation of the Soul. That aspect of your whole being which correlates, integrates & enlivens everything going on in the various components of the self. The life center; what takes all that is you, and external experiences & regulates them in overall life-governance. The soul's foundational, almost totally beyond conscious awareness. You don't think about it, or ask, "How's my soul?" It's intangible, spiritual. It's hard to speak of, and we can almost only give images of formed souls exemplifying good, or evil intent; character being the soul's window in how we live & react.

Psalm 1 gives us an image of a soul formed in the confines of a gracious relationship with God: *1 Blessed is the man - Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, - Nor stands in the path of sinners, - Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; - 2 But his delight is in the law of the Lord, - And in His law he meditates day & night. - 3 He shall be like a tree - Planted by the rivers of water, - That brings forth its fruit in its season, - Whose leaf also shall not wither; - And whatever he does shall prosper.*

An image of a well-kept heart. A soul ordered under God & in harmony with reality. A person prepared for & capable of responding to life situations in ways which are good & right. *The good man who brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart* due to his connection with the Divine Soul. His inclinations have become natural godly inclinations - not locked in self-conflict, contradiction & compromise - assured of what's good & life-giving & rejoicing in it - he doesn't struggle to do as Jesus did.

Physically healthy people make different choices than unhealthy people. They practice portion control & seek nutritional value in the foods they eat. They're inclined towards activity & exercise. It shows in their physical stature, countenance & mental health. Psalm 1 is the image of a person with Godly inclinations which have become natural inclinations. Healthy inclinations which create in them a state of goodness of soul reflective of God. Feeding on the nutritional value of God's Word, they're able to react in healthy ways. Their soul at peace even in outward chaos.

Psalm 1 reminds us of Romans 12:1-2. In Psalm 1 the man is partly defined by what he doesn't do, he doesn't walk *in the counsel of the ungodly, stand in the path of sinners, or sit in the seat of the scornful.* The same is true in Romans 12, where that person is called not to *conform to the patterns of this world.* These are people who don't determine their course of action by culture & humanistic wisdom - not even by Ted Talks! It's not as if they don't listen to the things going on around them, but they measure all things against the Word of God. They don't live as if God doesn't exist making decisions derived solely from human understanding - They know & love the standards of God. They know they've been redeemed from the inability to live up to the Law of God, but are grateful for the beautiful Truth of it, feeding themselves & living in obedience to it as best they can.

Those without this divine directive, even if they have a strong sense of morality, will always compromise the good they're called to, like Robert Dinero in *Righteous Kill* - since they don't have the foundational strength from a connection to the Father. They don't have that sense of safety in Christ (Colossians 3:3). They become the arrogant, the judgmental, the scornful; constantly defining & redefining right & wrong in order to justify themselves, scorning all who don't agree, as Dinero did in the movie with his partner. While the person whose soul's inclined towards Jesus will live in peace, enjoying Him in satisfying relationship! Under the safety of God's grace, living in obedience to the healthy standard of God's Law. They know right & wrong from the Scriptures, letting God define sin & goodness - no one else - especially not an increasingly godless culture. *Jeremiah 17:5-8* draws this clear comparison of two people:

“Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh & whose heart turns away from the Lord. 6That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. 7But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. 8They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought & never fails to bear fruit.”

Like a tree planted by a river sending down roots & drawing nourishment & water up, no matter the weather conditions on the surface of the ground - they're vibrantly alive & fruitful. But for so many, that seems like an impossibility, so they settle for a life of internal conflict & compromise. Their focus off Jesus, off his Word, never asking, 'How's my soul?' Internally & sometimes externally for that person, it's chaos & confusion. Living out of un-satiated desires, illusions & dreams. Enslaved to false ideas. Blown & tossed by every new idea, teaching, fad & issue. Controlled by bodily habits, falsehoods & misinformation. If you find yourself in constant inner turmoil, maybe you need to go back to the Word, to your brothers & sisters in Christ & into an extended time of prayer asking God, "How's my soul?" Remembering, this isn't something which is solved in one sitting, this is a lifetime of relational development with Jesus standing on revealed Scriptural Truth & within the confines of the healthy orthodox local church body.

Read through Proverbs & meet many of these people in turmoil. *Or, in Ecclesiastes 5:3b - many words mark the speech of the fool. But, when confronted with what the fool needs to do to get whole, they'll make all excuse as Proverbs 1:7 says - The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom & instruction.* That person can't get their act together, they've not learned to find rest in Christ & in his body which is the church. Connection of our soul with Christ brings with it a strength, power, guidance, awareness & ability to live out of the good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:10).

The soul can't be suppressed forever. The very fundamental aspects of life are soul functions: art, sleep, sex, ritual, family, parenting, community, health & meaningful

work. These things suffer when the soul's sick. That's why your spiritual formation affects & infects everyone around you.

One of our greatest societal problems now is the meaninglessness & hopelessness felt by all. Consider how many suicides just by famous people have happened in recent years. Think about the messages we hear of meaninglessness in theater, music & art. Think of the meaningless acts of disregarding peoples well-being from school shootings, to sex trafficking, or simply the broken relationships in your household. Meaninglessness pervades as the grander purpose of Christ is wiped off the cultural chalkboard of life.

As a result we can only put bandaids on the externals, but it's a societal soul problem - spiritual formation of the believer & evangelism of the nonbeliever is the only answer to social ills - the kingdom of God. You may say that's too simplistic. That answer may be simple, but not simplistic & certainly not easy. Almost any solution in life is the simple one, but usually not easy to carry out. To have a soul rooted so deeply in Christ, and at peace with him to effectively communicate that in word & deed to others is far from easy. But it is one light of peace sharing a light of peace with all the others.

Meaning is one of the greatest soul needs, maybe the most basic. When meaning's present, anything can be endured. When it's not, we're left with is boredom & despair; the insatiable desire to fill the void with fleeting pleasures & trinkets. There's no true internal drive without true meaning. The book of Ecclesiastes reveals there's no true meaning found in anything, but in the pursuit of God. A dead religion is one which has lost it's connection to Jesus, has disregarded his Word & allowed humanistic wisdom define what it is, which always ends in despair.

Despair as we seek success, ignoring the deeper problem of the human sinful condition. Therefore, when people sin, take advantage & constantly undermine themselves through bad decisions due to the lack of spiritual power, it doesn't fit our construct. The deeper issue is humanities soul connection with Christ; evangelism, including the repentance of sin, coming under the Lordship of Christ, communicated in true love has to always go hand-in-hand with physical ministry to people. Then & only then, can we withstand the knocks & disappointments which ministry brings with & stay the course of ministry.

Where divine meaning is lacking, performance is king. We see this in all aspects of life, but maybe none more-so than in sports. They create an illusion of meaning. We worship at its altar, and it creates in us fleeting small, almost magical moments of what we think is meaningful, but is so shallow that as soon as our team loses, we tear the city apart (even sometimes when we win)! But this is also seen in art, politics & even religion - we put pastors & leaders on pedestals as long as the deliver, but when they fail, we discard them like old sneakers, not realizing we've been complicit in the making of monsters. Fanaticism in any area is the result of inherently meaningless lives becoming obsessed with performance & trying to bring all of our existence into it. Being the best fan, or being the one most devoted to a cause is treated as something deep & important, but in reality it's a facade to answer our own deeper need. Just watch the opening ceremonies of the Super Bowl, or the Olympics, especially the games in Greece when the statue of

Aphrodite rose up out of the center & we witness the altar of humanistic worship - our fanaticism & meaninglessness is driven by something spiritual, but not of God.

Such people haven't cultivated a soul directed towards good & rooted in the one true God. Allowing a flow outside themselves to take over all thought, feeling, behavior & social relations. It's intoxicating, but not subjected to the tests of Truth, reality & godly values. We see this not just in sports, religion & art, but also in sex & success in the workplace. Even your children can become a false sense of overall meaning. A soul hungry for true meaning, but only gaining a false sense of it through any avenue, other than Christ, is easy prey to the pressures & flow of society & the inevitable failures of our idols. We sometimes see this in the vitriol of politics, our meaning too tied to candidates, parties & issues, not drawing it from Jesus. Which would instead bring peace & healthy life-giving conversation allowing God to move in society. Our focus on Christ for soul care can be diverted even in the good things.

Great despots of the world know this. Hitler incarcerated Jews, made them to move mountains of gravel from one end of the compound to the other, then back again. A meaningless task, then he gassed them, shot them & performed experiments on them. An effort to rob a people of their soul. Emptying them, creating a shell of humanity.

This sermon will continue to next week. But today lets just say the soul is like an inner stream of water which gives strength, direction & harmony to every other aspect of life. *Again, remember, Jesus said in John 4:14b ...the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Or, John 7:38, Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them. The soul in proper connection to God deriving meaning through that relationship above all else & pouring out to others in Truth & love.*

The biblical worldview is that every living thing receives its self-initiating, self-directing & self sustaining power from the hand of God. He's the breath of life within all of us. *This derivative life flows through us as the living soul. And humans have a unique form in the connection we have to God as seen in Genesis 1:7, Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground & breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. God's soul is that which is the deepest & most fundamental level of his being. About the Person of Jesus, the Father said, "Behold, my Servant whom I have chosen; My beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased." (Mt 12:18)* Likewise our soul is deeply connected to our Creator who breathed life into & sustains us. And Jesus, in his Human Nature, is the ultimate essence of the Person whose soul is right with the Father & whose example is to be followed in life. Not that we can be perfect in that emulation, but resting on the fact - he was perfect in his obedience to the perfect Law of God as it concerned his human nature, but was still crucified for our sin, should give us gratitude that we can walk this out under the blessings of his grace! Our lives are truly hidden with Christ in God! We are okay.

Job 12:10 in speaking of God tells us, *In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind.* In John 5:26, referring to the Father & himself, Jesus

stated, *For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.* In 1 Timothy 6:13 it identifies God as the one *who gives life to all things.* In John 10:10 Jesus said of himself, *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.* As the Creator & sustainer of life, it's only fitting we stay connected to him to get life.

When we're speaking of the human soul therefore, we're speaking of something very profound. Something which should be always connected to the one True God. So when Jesus says in Matthew 16:24-27, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves & take up their cross & follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.*

He's saying don't lose your soul in the pursuit of false meaning - don't abandon it in favor of externals. Don't reflect in the negative what 1 Peter 2:11 tells us - *Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners & exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.* We're foreigners & exiles only in the sense, we've given over the very flow of our life to its Creator. *No longer do we conform to the patterns of this world as Christians, but we're being transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2).* We no longer go with the flow of an increasing godless society, our flow is congruent with Christ.

Scripture is replete with word pictures & urgings to this end - James 1:19-25, *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. 21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth & the evil that is so prevalent & humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. 22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away & immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.*

James is basically saying the same as what we've been hearing for weeks, the same as that in Romans 12:1-2 & other places - submit yourselves to Christ, root yourself in Truth, go with the flow of life which begins & is sustained by Jesus. Don't be duplicitous. Saying one thing, doing another. But walk this out with Jesus with others. Spend the necessary time to look deeply into the Law of God, the Scriptures, communing with your Creator & asking, “How's my Soul?” Because, *“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45)*