

“The Struggle of the Soul”

Date: Sept. 20, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Soul Keeping, series

Theme: temptation, the soul

Texts: Luke 9:23-24; Matthew 13:3-9

We're in the second week of a series entitled "Soul Keeping." A quote from the book, written by John Ortberg: "The most important thing about you is not the things you achieve; it is the person you become."

Our problem is this world does not teach us to pay attention to what matters. We circulate resumes that document what we have accomplished, not who we have become. The world tries to define us by what we have done - our accomplishments, our achievements, our talents and abilities.

We admire, we almost worship, certain personalities because of what they have accomplished: football players, actors and actresses, doctors, singers and musicians. These are the people that we idolize. But very often the people we idolize have very shallow characters without any integrity.

God waits to redeem our souls. God wants to save lost souls, not just so that Heaven will be full in the afterlife, but so that the lives lived on earth will be more complete, more whole, more integrated. But we are so busy doing the stuff that we're doing that we fail to attend to our souls.

Jesus said, "whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." The seed in Jesus's parable about the Sower, is a little picture of God's desire to

redeem souls, to turn people who have trouble dying to self into people who live by dying to self.”

The sower is God. The soil is a metaphor for the soul. Some seeds fall on the path, Jesus said. The path is hard and dry, and the seeds don't have a chance. Souls can get that way. People who have been hurt or disappointed often form a protective shell. They become cynical or suspicious.

Underneath the hardness is often fear: the fear of being rejected, the fear of looking foolish, the fear of being hurt. Fearful people can become hardened. Hurt people often hurt others, not because they're bad people; they just have a hard heart.

This is not how God intended us to live. But souls can be saved when the soil gets soft. It takes just a little bit of softness for the seed to have a chance, for the soul to have a chance. The hardened soul is closer to being saved than it knows.

Some of the seed fell on rocky soil. The idea is not that there were a bunch of rocks, but there was only a thin layer of topsoil with solid rock underneath. The seed had life, until the sun came out. But the life withers quickly, because the soil is too shallow for roots.

The world conspires against our souls, keeping our lives superficial. For much of our lives we live in the shallows. “Superficiality is the curse of our age,” writes Richard Foster. But the soul cries out for depth. The soul is the deepest part of you.

The psalmist wrote, “As the deer pants for streams of water so my soul pants for you... Why, my soul, are you downcast?... Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls.” The soul is the deepest

part of you. A soul has depth when it is connected to God. The soul struggles when it is disconnected from God. It lacks depth.

But it takes such a tiny little depth in the soil to give the seed a chance, to give the soul a chance. The shallow soul is closer to being saved than it knows.

Some seeds fell among thorns, which grow up and choke the plants. This is the condition where the worries of this life and the lies of wealth and the desire for other things come and choke the soul.

Somebody said a long time ago that if the Devil can make you sin, he will make you busy, because either way your soul will shrivel. Our world, the world we live in, will divert your soul's attention because it is a cluttered world. And clutter may be the most dangerous struggle of the soul, because it is so subtle.

The busy soul gets attached to the wrong things, because the soul is sticky. The Velcro of the soul is what Jesus calls "desire." It could be the desire for money, or it could simply be the desire for 'other things.'

We mistake our clutter for life itself. If we cease to be busy, do we matter? A person who is pre-occupied with externals – success, reputation, ceaseless activity, lifestyle – may be dead inside and not even recognize it.

Thorny soil represents a cluttered soul, that chokes on the desire for things besides God. And yet, it takes a little, such a tiny little uncluttered space to give the soul some room to grow. The cluttered soul is closer to being saved than it knows.

The good soil represents a healthy soul. We can have a healthy soul. We get to choose the kind of soul we have. Jesus wants us to

live with a healthy soul, but much of the time we settle for living with a lost soul. Why is that? Well, whenever we talk about the soul, we inevitably end up talking about sin. And sin splits the self.

The soul integrates all the different parts of who we are: the will, the mind, the body. Sin dis-integrates them, causing them not to be integrated, and they are at war with each other. The psalmist wrote, “Bless the Lord, o my soul, *and all that is within me.*”

In other words, it is my soul that connects *all that is within me*. It is our soul that cries out for integration, for wholeness, for oneness, for harmony. This can only happen when my soul, my whole life, is connected to God.

What sin does is break this connection with God and his love. And the result is that our lives are split apart. We say that we want to live a certain way, and we find ourselves doing things that go exactly against what we say and think about ourselves.

I want to be an honest person, but I find that I sometimes fudge the truth. I want to be a man of integrity and honor my marriage vows, and I find that at times I have lust in my heart for another woman. I want to be a patient man, and I find that at times I am anything but.

What’s my problem? Sin. It tears me apart, just like it does to every human being. I don’t like to think of myself as dishonest, cheating, or impatient, so I tell lies to myself. I rationalize and tell myself, “It wasn’t that big of a deal. Every man looks. I’m only human. Everybody does it, whatever “it” is.”

But there are no little sins. *Every* sin breaks the connection with God. And my soul struggles. Ortberg says that once we rationalize

that first sin, it makes it all the more likely we will do it again, and more.

Sin begets sin. And the pattern repeats and we are more disconnected from ourselves and from God. We find ourselves in this odd place where we want to do good things, but we don't. And we want to avoid acting and behaving in certain ways, and we still have issues with jealousy, greed, anger, lust and deceit.

The apostle Paul describes our condition this way: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it. I have discovered this principle of life – that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong." (Romans 7:18-21, NLT)

The soul struggles because of sin. The soul wants to be connected to God. The soul hungers for that connection. Jesus shows us the way. Jesus shows us the way by the way that He lived. Jesus shows us how by providing a way for the soul to be forgiven and reconnected to God the Father. That is the work of the cross.

My dear friends, we get to choose the kind of soul we have. Jesus wants us to live with a healthy soul. Our soul always craves the good soil. In the coming weeks we're going to be talking a lot more about what the soul needs. I hope you'll keep coming back, as we go deeper into Soul Keeping.

In the meantime, please remember, the most important thing about you is not the thing you achieve. It is the person you become.

Amen? Amen.