

## “What is a Soul?”

Date: August 30, 2015

Texts: Matthew 11:28-30; Mark 8:36-37

Occasion: Series, Soul Keeping

Place: Lakewood UMC

Theme: The soul

In two weeks we're launching a new series called "Soul Keeping," based on a book by the best-selling author, John Ortberg. This morning, I want to whet your appetite for the subject. We use that term *soul* a lot in church, but do we really know what it is?

How many of you learned this prayer as a child, or have taught it to your children at bedtime? "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?"

Is it just me, or are those scary words to teach a five year old to pray alone in the dark? What does it mean to ask God, "my soul to keep?" And if I expire before sunrise, and God does take my soul, what exactly is it that gets taken?"

One psychiatrist and ordained minister, Jeffrey Boyd, once did a survey of church attenders to see if they knew what the word *soul* meant. But when asked to explain it, most of them couldn't do it. They had a vague hunch of what it meant, but couldn't put it into words.

About half of the church attenders he interviewed adopted what Boyd later called the Looney Tunes Theory of the Soul. Here's the explanation: "If Daffy Duck were blown up with dynamite, then there would be a transparent image of Daffy Duck that would float up from the dead body. The translucent image would have wings and carry a harp. From the air, this apparition would speak to Bugs Bunny down below, who set off the dynamite."

It sounds funny to talk about cartoons when it comes to the soul, but it's the image that comes to many people's minds when you talk about the soul.

The word soul is a part of our vocabulary. We can't seem to talk about beauty or art without talking about the soul, particularly music. Aretha Franklin is the Queen of soul music. Beautiful art is said to be an expression of a person's soul.

Black folks have what is called soul food, which I discovered is the name given for Southern cooking that began with slaves who had to survive on whatever leftovers they were given. Sports teams may refer to an inspiring player on the team as the soul of that team.

Operas, books and movies have been made based on the theme of selling one's soul. But what is it that they're selling? Ebay has a policy that forbids the selling of souls. Evidently they've had people try to sell their soul online. Go figure.

Does a fetus have a soul? A whole debate about abortion rages around this. Does the soul enter the body at conception, or only later in development? Do souls migrate, coming back in another life – the theory of reincarnation?

Are souls reserved for humans? Do cats and dogs have souls? If a computer were able to think, could it have a soul? If you cloned a human being, would the soul exist in two separate bodies? We speak of the eyes as being the window to the soul; we say that you can tell who a person truly is by looking into their eyes. Really?

Churches are supposed to know about souls. Our opening song this morning said "Bless the Lord, o my soul." How can my soul bless God, or make God happy? Sometimes we speak of souls as if they

were spiritual scalps: certain people are highly regarded in some churches for their ability to “win souls.” We often pray for lost souls. We get teary eyed at the evangelist who desires to win “just one more soul for Jesus.” What is it that is being saved, anyway?

Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” He also said, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”

And we pray, “If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take....” What is the soul?

John Ortberg explores that question in detail in the second chapter of his book. He begins by explaining the difference between a person’s outer world and inner world. The outer world is what we see – what we do during the day, our accomplishments, our work, our reputation. But that’s not who we are on the inside.

He goes on to quote a favorite author, friend and spiritual guide Dallas Willard: “What is running your life at any given moment is your soul. Not external circumstances, not your thoughts, not your intentions, not even your feelings, but your soul. Your soul is that aspect of your whole being that correlates, integrates, and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self. The soul is the life center of human beings.”

The soul, he explains, is what helps to integrate all the various parts of a human being: their will, their mind, their body, into a whole life. The soul seeks harmony, connection and integration. Integrity is a soul-word.

An unhealthy soul is one that experiences dis-integration; it's not in harmony; it's out of kilter. Sin always causes dis-integration of the soul. Ortberg then offers a new explanation of Jesus' teaching about gaining the whole world but forfeiting one's soul. He said,

"I always thought this verse meant that in the long run it won't do you any good to acquire a lot of money, and have a lot of sex and other sensual pleasures, if you end up going to hell."

But he changed his view after talking to his friend, Dallas Willard, who pops up in this book a lot. "That is not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is not talking here about people going to hell. Jesus is talking about a diagnosis, not a destination.

"If we think of hell as a torture chamber and heaven as a pleasure factory, we will never understand Jesus' point. The unhealthy soul happens when the will, the mind and the body are disconnected from God. That life is living at odds with the way God made life in the universe to run. Acquiring the whole world would not produce satisfaction, let alone meaning and goodness.

To lose my soul means I no longer have a healthy center that organizes and guides my life. I'm a car without a steering wheel. It doesn't matter how fast I can go, because I'm a crash waiting to happen.

Gaining the outside world doesn't help you, if your inside world collapses. Look at the world we live in. We live on a planet of lost souls. That is the human problem. Saving souls is not simply about trying to help people get the right afterlife. It's reconnecting the soul to God, the Source of Life. That's what Jesus does – He reconnects us to God, who reorders our lives.

Jesus, the great Soul Physician, understood the depth of the human condition like nobody else ever has. Jesus heals the sin-sick soul. Now, our world has replaced the word *soul* with *self*. They are not the same thing. The more we focus on ourselves, the more we neglect our souls.

Psychology, which takes its name from the Greek word *psyche*, has focused on the self. But self carries a totally different connotation than the soul. To focus on my soul means to look at my life under the care and connection of God. To focus on myself apart from God means losing awareness of what matters most.

Ironically, the more obsessed we are with ourselves, the more we neglect our souls. “You are a soul made *by* God, made *for* God, and made to *need* God, which means that you were not made to be self-sufficient.” The soul wants to be connected to God.

In the course of this sermon series and study group we’re going to look more closely at what the soul is, and what the soul needs. But today, hear these words of Jesus again, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

In a moment we’re going to sing a song that speaks to us about the peace and rest that staying connected to God can bring. But first, would you bow your heads for a moment?

This is a soul moment for God and you. Where does your soul need to be healed? From sin? From regret? From a loss too deep for words? From a broken relationship? Jesus is still in the soul-healing business. Let him speak to your soul right now. (quiet, Amen.)