

# Personal Soul Care

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*Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life.* Prov. 4:23, NASB

The call of God to minister the gospel is a high honor and a noble challenge. It carries with it unique opportunities as well as special burdens and dangers for members of the clergy as well as their families. These burdens can be fruitfully born and the dangers triumphantly overcome. But that will not happen unless the minister's "inner person" (2 Cor. 4:16) is constantly renewed by accessing the riches of God and His kingdom in the inner person.

## **The Soul And The Great Commandment**

"Soul" is here defined as the hidden or "spiritual" side of the person. It includes an individual's thoughts and feelings, along with heart or will, with its intents and choices. It also includes an individual's bodily life and social relations, which, in their inner meaning and nature, are just as "hidden" as the thoughts and feelings.

The secret to a strong, healthy, and fruitful ministerial life lies in how we work *with* God in all of these dimensions. Together they make up the real person. They are the inescapable sources of our outward life, and they almost totally determine what effects, for good or ill, our ministerial activities will have. Natural gifts, external circumstances, and special opportunities are of little significance. The good tree, Jesus said, "bears

good fruit” (Matt. 7:17, NASB). If we tend to the tree, the fruit will take care of itself.

The inner dimensions of life are what are referred to in the Great Commandment: “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 10:27, NASB). This commandment does not so much tell us what we must do, as what we must cultivate in the care of our souls. This is true for all believers and is certainly true for ministers of the gospel.<sup>1</sup> Our high calling and sacrificial service can find adequate support only in a personality totally saturated with God’s kind of love, *agape* (see 1 Cor. 13).

But we must be very clear that the great biblical passages on love—those cited above and others, including 1 John 4—do *not* tell us to act as if we loved God with our whole beings, and our neighbors as ourselves. Such an attempt, without the love of God indwelling us, would be an impossible burden. We would become angry and hopeless—as, in fact, happens to many ministers and their families.

### **Character and the “Fruit of the Spirit”**

The “sudden” failures that appear in the lives of some ministers are never really sudden but are the surfacing of long-standing deficiencies in “the hidden person of the heart” (1 Pet. 3:4, NASB). Divine love permeating every part of our lives is, by contrast, a resource adequate to every condition of life and death, as I Cor. 13 assures us. This love is, in the words of Jesus, “a well of water springing up to eternal life” (John 4:14, NASB). And from those possessed of divine love there truly flows “rivers of living water” to a thirsty world (see 7:38, NASB).

The people to whom we minister and speak will not recall 99 percent of what we say to them. But they will never forget the kind of persons we are. This is true of influential ministers in my past. The quality of our souls will indelibly touch others for good or for ill. So we must never forget that the most important thing happening at any moment, in the

midst of all our ministerial duties, is the kind of persons we are becoming.

God is greatly concerned with the quality of character we are building. The future He has planned for us will be built on the strength of character we forge by His grace. Intelligent, loving devotion to Christ will grow in importance through eternity and will never become obsolete.

It is God's intention that our lives should be a seamless manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23, NASB). He has made abundant provision for His indwelling our lives in the here and now. Appropriate attention to the care of our souls through His empowerment will yield this rich spiritual fruit and deliver us from the sad list of "deeds of the flesh" (vv. 19-21, NASB). We can be channels of the grace of the risen Christ, and through our ministerial activities—speaking, praying, healing, administering—He can minister to others. But we must attend to the means of His grace in practical and specific ways to experience His life into and through our lives.

### **“Practicing the Presence of God”**

The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds. David knew this secret and wrote, "I have set the Lord continually before me; because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will dwell securely" (Ps. 16:8-9, NASB).

This is *the* fundamental secret of caring for our souls. Our part in thus practicing the presence of God is to direct and redirect our minds constantly to Him. In the early time of our "practicing" we may well be challenged by our burdensome habits of dwelling on things less than God. But these are habits—not the law of gravity—and can be broken. A new, grace-filled habit will replace the former ones as we take intentional steps toward keeping God before us. Soon our minds will

return to God as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north. If God is the great longing of our souls, He will become the pole star of our inward beings.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus Christ is, of course, the Door, the Light, and the Way. We are privileged to walk in this profound reality, not just preach it. We first receive God into our minds by receiving Jesus. The way forward then lies in intentionally keeping the scenes and words of the New Testament Gospels before our minds, carefully reading and rereading them day by day. We revive them in word and imagination as we arise in the morning, move through the events of the day, and lie down at night. By this means we walk with Him moment by moment—the One who promised to be with us always.

As a beginning step in this “practicing” process, we can choose to practice constantly returning our minds to God in Christ on a given day. In the evening then we can review how we did and think of ways to do it better the next day. As we continue this practice, gently but persistently, we soon will find that the person of Jesus and His beautiful words are “automatically” occupying our minds instead of the clutter and noise of the world—even the church world.

Our concentration on Jesus will be strengthened by memorization of great passages (*not* just verses) from Scripture. Passages such as Matt. 7, John 14-17, 1 Cor. 13, and Col. 3 are terrific “soul growing” selections. This practice of memorizing the Scriptures is more important than a daily quiet time, for as we fill our minds with these great passages and have them available for our meditation, “quiet time” takes over the entirety of our lives.

God’s word to Joshua, as he undertook the great task before him, was, “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success” (Josh. 1:8, NASB). Psalm 1 demonstrates that this became a part of the recognized practice of

spiritual living among the Israelites. Meditation on Him and His Word must become an integral part of our lives too.

But how does the law get *in your mouth*? By memorization, of course. It becomes an essential part of how we think about everything else as we  *dwell on it*. Then the things that come before us during the day come in the presence of God’s illuminating Word. Light dwells within us and enables us to see the things of life in the right way. “In Thy light we see light” (Ps. 36:9, NASB). This is the true education for ministry and for life.

## **Love and Worship**

As the Living Word and the written Word occupy our minds we naturally—and supernaturally—come to love God more and more because we see, clearly and constantly, how lovely He is.

The wise Puritan, Thomas Watson, wrote:

The first fruit of love is *the musing of the mind upon God*. He who is in love, his thoughts are ever upon the object. He who loves God is ravished and transported with the contemplation of God. “*When I awake, I am still with thee*” (Ps. 139:18). The thoughts are as travelers in the mind. David’s thoughts kept heaven-road. “*I am still with Thee.*” God is the treasure, and where the treasure is, there is the heart. By this we may test our love to God. What are our thoughts most upon? Can we say we are ravished with delight when we think on God? Have our thoughts got wings? Are they fled aloft? Do we contemplate Christ and glory? ... A sinner crowds God out of his thoughts. He never thinks of God, unless with horror, as the prisoner thinks of the judge.<sup>3</sup>

In this way we enter a life, not just *times*, of worship. The hymn of heaven will be a constant presence in our inner lives: “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and forever” (Rev. 5:13, NASB).

Worship will become the constant undertone of our lives. It is the single most powerful force in completing and sustaining restoration of our whole beings to God. Nothing can inform, guide, and sustain pervasive and radiant goodness in a person other than the true vision of God and the worship that spontaneously arises from it. Then the power of the indwelling Christ flows from us to others.

Remember, however, that we are not *trying* to worship. Worship is not another job we have to do. It is one aspect of the gift of “living water” that springs “up to eternal life” (John 4:14; 7:38, NASB). Our part is to turn our minds toward God and to attend to His graceful actions in our souls. This is the primary “care of the soul” we must exercise. Then love and worship, worship and love, flow in our lives as we walk constantly with God. By stepping with Him—in the flow of His grace—we live with spontaneity, love our neighbors, and minister the word and power of the gospel.

### **Opening to the Fullness of Joy**

Personal soul care also requires attending to our feelings. Emotions are a real component of life and of our lives in Christ. Some ministers allow their emotions to defeat them.

We do well to note, however, that *love* is the foundation of the spiritual life and *joy* is a key component in the Christ life. Joy is not pleasure, a mere sensation, but a pervasive and constant sense of well-being. Hope in the goodness of God is joy’s indispensable support.

In a moment of worship and praise, Paul spontaneously expressed a benediction on the Christians in Rome: “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13, NASB). This verse addresses the profound needs of the emotional side of the Christian’s life.

The great central terms of life in Christ are “faith,” “hope,” “love,” and “peace.” These are not *just* feelings; in substance, they are not feelings. They are conditions involving every part of an individual’s life, including the body and the social context. They serve to equip us for the engagements of life. They do, however, have feelings that accompany them, and these positive feelings abundantly characterize those living in the presence of God. These feelings displace the bitter and angry feelings, that characterize life “in the flesh”—life in human energies only. They even transform the sickening emotional tones that permeate

and largely govern the world around us—even many times the Church world.

Jesus taught us to abide in God’s love “that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15: 10-11, NASB). Our joy is full when there is no room for more. Abiding in God’s love provides the unshakable source of joy, which is in turn the source of peace. All is based in the reality of God’s grace and goodness.

*Faith, hope, love, joy, and peace*—the “magnificent five”—are inseparable from one another and reciprocally support each other. Try to imagine any one without the others!

## **Solitude and Silence**

Among the practices that can help us attend to soul care at a basic level are *solitude* and *silence*. We practice these by finding ways to be alone and away from talk and noise. We rest, we observe, we “smell the roses”—dare we say it?—we do *nothing*. This discipline can be used of God as a means of grace. In it we may even find another reminder of grace—that we are saved, justified by His redeeming power—not by our strivings and achievements.

In drawing aside for lengthy periods of time, we seek to rid ourselves of the “corrosion” of soul that accrues from constant interaction with others and the world around us. In this place of quiet communion, we discover again that we *do* have souls, that we indeed have inner beings to be nurtured. Then we begin to experience again the presence of God in the inner sanctuary, speaking to and interacting with us. We understand anew that God will not compete for our attention. We must arrange time for our communion with Him as we draw aside in solitude and silence.

The psalmist said, “Cease striving and know that I am God” (Ps. 46: 10, NASB). And immediately following this, the writer affirms the success of God’s mission on earth: “‘I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.’ The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold” (vv. 10-11, NASB).

Other translations of this verse read, “Be still, and know” (NIV) or “Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me” (TM). God’s provision for us and for His work through us is adequate. We do not have to “make it happen.” We must stop shouldering the burdens of “outcomes.” These are safely in His hands. Someone insightfully said, “The greatest threat to devotion to Christ is service for Christ.”

What a paradox! This is so easily a challenge for many ministers. Allowing service for Christ to steal our devotion to Him is a radical failure in personal soul care. But it is one from which the practice of communing with Christ in times of solitude and silence can deliver us.

### **Time is Made, Not “Found”**

A response to giving attention to personal soul care often is, “I don’t have time for extensive solitude and silence. I have too much to do.” The truth is you don’t have time *not* to practice solitude and silence. No time is more profitably spent than that used to heighten the quality of an intimate walk with God. If we think otherwise, we have been badly educated. The real question is, “Will we take time to do what is necessary for an abundant life and an abundant ministry, or will we try to ‘get by’ without it?”

So a couple of words of counsel are appropriate for our attending to the inner life. First, God never gives anyone too much to do. We do that to ourselves or allow others to do it to us. We may be showing our lack of confidence in God’s power and goodness, though it may be that our models and education have failed us. Second, the exercise of God’s power in ministry never, by itself, amends character, and it rarely makes up for our own foolishness. God’s power can be actively and wisely sought and received by us only as we seek to grow by grace into Christlikeness. Power *with* Christlike character is God’s unbeatable combination of triumphant life in the kingdom of God on earth and forever. Power without Christ’s character gives us our modern-day Sampsons and Sauls.



Knowing Christ through times away in solitude and silence will “let our joy be full” (see John 16:24). It will bring over us a pervasive sense of well-being, no matter what is happening around us. Hurry and the loneliness of leadership will be eliminated. We can allow the peace of God to sink deeply into our lives and extend through our relationships to others (see Matt. 10:12-13).

A young Christian who had been guided into the effective practice of solitude and silence had this to say:

The more I practice this discipline, the more I appreciate the strength of silence. The less I become skeptical and judgmental, the more I learn to accept the things I didn't like about others, and the more I accept them as uniquely created in the image of God. The less I talk, the fuller are words spoken at an appropriate time. The more I value others, the more I serve them in small ways, and the more I enjoy and celebrate my life. The more I celebrate, the more I realize that God has been giving me wonderful things in my life, and the less I worry about my future. I will accept and enjoy what God is continuously giving to me. I think I am beginning to really enjoy God.<sup>4</sup>

Experiencing God through the practice of connecting with Him via this discipline brings rich rewards.

## **Planning for Fullness of Life**

Our discussion so far has been more illustrative than expository. Solitude and silence are absolutely basic in our responsibility to soul care. But they also open before us the whole area of *disciplines* for the spiritual life. It is vital for us to keep before us that there are tried and true ways we can pursue toward abundant life in Christ. These ways are often referred to as “spiritual disciplines.”<sup>5</sup> We can and must incorporate these into our lives as completely reliable ways of personal soul care. There is no substitute for this.

A person could make a long list of such disciplines, drawing on the history of Christ's people. The list would certainly include fasting, which when rightly practiced has incredible power for the transformation of character and for ministry. On this list would also be such practices as frugality, service, celebration, prayer (as a discipline),

journaling, fellowship, accountability relationships, submission, confession, and many others.

There is no such thing as a complete list of the disciplines. Any activity that is in our power and enables us to achieve by grace what we cannot achieve by direct effort is a discipline of the spiritual life.<sup>6</sup>

As we seek to know Christ by incorporating appropriate disciplines into our lives, we must keep in mind that they are not ways of earning merit. They also are not paths of suffering or self-torment. They are not heroic. They are not righteousness, but they are wisdom.

Once we learn that grace is not opposed to effort (action)—though it is opposed to earning (attitude)—the way is open for us to “work out” all that is involved in our salvation, not only “with fear and trembling” but also with the calm assurance that it is God who is at work in us to accomplish all of His goodwill (see Phil. 2:12-13, NASB).

When we have settled into a life of sensible disciplines with our ever-present Teacher, then Peter’s admonition (2 Pet. 1:5-7) to add virtue to our faith, knowledge or understanding to our virtue, self-control to our knowledge, patience to our self-control, godliness to our patience, brotherly kindness to our godliness, and divine love (agape) to our brotherly kindness will prove to be a sensible plan for life. God will use this course of action to help others through our ministries as well.

“As long as you practice these things,” Peter continues (v. 10, NASB), “you will never stumble.” In our walk with God in Christ there will be provided to us, from “His riches in glory” (see Phil. 4:19, NASB), sweetness and strength of character, profundity of insight and understanding, and abundance of power to manifest the glory of God in life and in ministry—no matter the circumstances! And “entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you” (2 Pet. 1: 11)

## NOTES

- For development of this point see my *Renovation of the Heart*, especially chapter 2 (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002). [Return to text.](#)
- For some illustrations of how this works, see Frank Laubach, “Letters of a Modern Mystic” and “Game with Minutes,” in *Frank C. Laubach: Man of Prayer* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Laubach Literacy International, “New Readers Press,” 1990). [Return to text.](#)
- Thomas Watson, *All Things for Good* (1663; reprint, Carlisle, Penn.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 74. [Return to text.](#)
- Quoted from Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 165. [Return to text.](#)
- For further discussion see Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), as well as his *Streams of Living Water* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). See also Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. [Return to text.](#)
- See Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, as well as Chapter 9 of my *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, for ways of listing and classifying many of the disciplines and for discussions of any particular ones. [Return to text.](#)