

What a SOUL NEEDS

We know a lot about how to care for our bodies. Our diet and exercise habits are well-informed. But what about our souls? Most problems are soul problems. Your soul is your deepest you—and God loves your deepest you. How do we take care of our souls? We need to nourish our inner lives and become people whose hearts, minds, wills and bodies are integrated and whole. This summer, we look to the middle chapters of Matthew to discover what the soul needs to find health and peace—resting in the hands of a God who loves us.

SOUL FIT • Matthew 16:24-27 • Tim McConnell • June 11, 2017

So here is how Jesus sets it up. On one side is everything in the world: all imaginable wealth, all the land, all the power, all the animal kingdom, everything at your disposal you could imagine. On the other side is your soul. Jesus makes the claim that if you took the world and lost your soul it would be a bad exchange, a bad deal. Your soul is more valuable. Seems like we should spend more time caring for our souls. I know a lot of people who do Cross-fit—this high-powered multi-discipline fitness regimen where you toss kettle balls and throw tires and all that stuff. I'm not sure what kind of psychological deficiency... I mean what motivates this activity. Actually, people who get into it talk about how great it feels and how strong the community is and how confident they are. But what about "soul fit"? Cross-fit says a body is healthy when it is agile, strong, flexible, powerful, and coordinated—and can toss a tractor tire twelve feet. What about a soul? When is a soul healthy? How is your soul? "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?" (Matthew 16:26)

Your soul is the deepest part of you. It's the foundation. It's the root. It's the core. The part of you that goes on and on no matter what happens to your body, even no matter what happens to your mind. Your soul is deeper than those; more fundamental to your being. Most problems are soul problems. We don't always realize it, but most problems are soul problems. If the soul rots out nothing else will stay healthy. The soul is at the foundation. If there are problems in the foundation, they run all the way up the structure. If you build a building on a faulty foundation, it has no chance. Do you ever try to make one of those stone stacks—cairns—on the trail in the mountains? If the bottom rock is shaky, you aren't going to get anywhere with the rest. There's no amount of shift or counterbalance at the top to make up for an unsteady foundation at the bottom. Your mind, your body, your will, all these things that make up who you are all rest on your soul at the foundation. Your soul is your deepest you.

If the soul is not at peace, it grows restless and relentless in seeking satisfaction. You may have heard how the mathematician Blaise Pascal said there is a God-shaped hole in every heart. He didn't say it so cleanly—that's the Tweet-able version. What he wrote was that there is a deep and unsatisfied and

helpless craving in each of us: "What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself" (Pascal, *Pensees*). Most problems are soul problems brought about by this desperate attempt to find peace, and knowing that the things that are currently right here are not producing that peace, we strike out looking for anything and everything to possibly satisfy the soul. But what the soul, which is eternal, actually needs is a God who is eternal to settle and found it on something solid. The little stands we try to rest our souls on are just too small and wobbly to rest an eternal and infinite object. Only God can satisfy your soul. Only God is a foundation strong enough, solid enough. Only the hands of the living God are sure and steady enough to keep your soul.

We have seen soul problems, haven't we? In his book, *Soul Keeping*, John Ortberg gives us a great illustration of this problem. The lost soul problem. Most problems are soul problems. Here's how he describes it, "To lose my soul means I no longer have a healthy center that organizes and guides my life. I am a car without a steering wheel. It doesn't matter how fast I can go, because I am a crash waiting to happen." (p. 44) I love that. Imagine a car cruising down the highway without a steering wheel. For a while the driver is happy as can be. "I'm making great progress!" Crash! How's your soul? Sometimes soul problems produce a huge embarrassing collapse, a public scandal, a failed marriage, a sudden exposure of a secret life and all is lost. But other times the soul just quietly disintegrates, trying day by day to dull the deep and unsatisfied ache.

So, listen, most problems are soul problems. In fact, if you are a note taker I want you to write two things down: (1) Most problems are soul problems. That's the hard stuff; that's the bad news. Here's the good news: (2) God loves your deepest you. Your deepest you is your soul. God loves your deepest you. And when I say "God loves," I'm not talking about warm feelings. I'm not talking about affec-

tionate sentiments. Love is more than that. Love is not just feeling great about someone or about how that someone makes you feel. Love is active. Love is when we sacrifice ourselves for the well-being of another. When I say "God loves your deepest you," I'm saying God stands at the ready to intervene and bring health to your soul. I'm saying God cares about where your soul is, how your soul is doing. God is invested and even self-sacrificing in sending His Son Jesus Christ—God is invested and self-sacrificing for the health of your soul. God loves your deepest you. He talks about it all the time.

Let's look at our passage: "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. 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?' (Matthew 16:24-26) Jesus wants us to know there is no greater concern than the well-being of our soul. Not just where your soul will go after you die, but how your soul is doing right now. This is where we need to concentrate a little. How's your soul? What is a healthy soul? How do you care for your soul? And Jesus makes clear this first and most important point: no matter what else you do, where else you go, what else you gain or lose, your soul will not be at peace until it rests on a solid and eternal foundation; your soul will not cease its tumbling and bumbling along until it is seated firmly in the eternal hands of the living God.

"Whoever wants to be my disciple," says Jesus, "must deny himself and take up his cross." She must deny herself and take up her cross. And this at a time when as Jesus said those words you would not have to look far to see someone literally hanging from a cross and waiting to die in agony. This is not partial commitment. This is total commitment. It is your whole life, your whole soul Jesus is after. Not some sideways passing interest. If you want to follow me, says Jesus, it's your whole life given over, it's your whole soul placed in my hands and mine alone. Dale Bruner says, "Here Jesus spells out the crucial motive in discipleship: risking one's life on the dare that Jesus is *It*." (*Matthew Commentary*, Vol 2, p. 148) Soul health is possible because God loves your deepest you—but it means putting your deepest you fully in the hands of God.

Jesus goes on, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." (Matthew 16:25) Or let me give you Dale Bruner's translation: "Whoever wants to save one's life will ruin it, but whoever throws one's life away, out of devotion to me, will actually save it." Your soul is your most prized possession. It is worth all the world. It is of more value, says this Scripture, than the entire world. Your soul is eternal. You will either be in eternity with God, or in eternity painfully separated from God and from life and light and joy—but eternal. Eternity is the lifespan of the soul. What do you have more important than that? More valuable? Now, where do you keep your most valuable possessions? In a safe. Or in a vault at the bank with guards and cameras and laser traps. Where should you keep your soul? "The Lord is your keeper" says Psalm 121. "The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore." (Psalm 121:5-8 ESV) Where should you keep your soul? The Lord is your keeper. Entrust your soul to Jesus. He is the only one worthy, proven and worthy, to keep it safe and secure and sound forever.

Because if you lose it, if you lose your soul... "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?" (Matthew 16:26) I bet you've heard a story about some great business leader, lying on the death bed, who would give back every penny, scratch off every accomplishment to have his soul back, to have his or her soul—her deepest self—restored to the joy of the Lord. To have had a soul that is full and healthy and a blessing to her family, instead of one that was withered and blighted and a drain to all those around her for so many years. If you lose your soul, what can you use to buy it back? How much money? How much notoriety? How much fame and success? Put your soul where it is finally and eternally safe—in the hands of Jesus. Most problems are soul problems. But soul health is possible because God loves your deepest you. The first step to a healthy soul is this, it's right here in Jesus convicting words: turn your soul over to Jesus. When it seems hard to know what to do, remember, who is it that models all of this for us? Who is it who truly knows what it means to lay down his life, to carry his cross, to give his life to save a soul? Jesus, who died for you, will not fail to hold on to your soul once you place it in His hands.

I recently heard the story of a pastor who wanted to be more fit. Enough of the lunches and the donuts and the stressors making his belt disappear. So he hired himself a trainer. It was hard at first, but after a few weeks he was proud of his progress. Most of the soreness was going away and he was able to do more and more. On the eighth week he was feeling incredible progress, and even thinking about when he might let the trainer go and just work out on his own and keep this momentum going. He got to the gym and said to the trainer, "Oh no! You know what we forgot? We forgot to take a 'before' picture all those weeks ago when I got started so we could celebrate the progress I've made." The trainer looked him up and down then said, "Oh, we can still take it."

Soul health might be further off than we realize. It might take some long-term changes and steady training. But your soul is worth it. You are worth it. God loves your deepest you. He wants to see you thriving and healthy. Not only for you, but for those around you who will benefit from your deep, spiritual foundations of peace. Not only for you, not only for those around you, but for the glory of God who transforms souls into His own holy and perfect likeness to the honor of His name. Most problems are soul problems. God loves your deepest you. He is able to carry you from here to healthy, so "To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen." (Jude 1:24-25)

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STUDY GUIDE

"What a Soul Needs: Soul Fit" Matthew 16:24-27

Start It

- Somewhere in your house is your most prized possession. That thing you know could not be replaced in the event of a fire. It is more valuable to you than it would ever be on the open market, and it is irreplaceable. You have taken precautions to insure it, to protect it, and to guard it as best you can. It may be in a safe, or under glass, or even plastered into the wall! Your most prized possession is something you cannot stand the idea of losing. But Jesus says your soul is more valuable still.

Study It

- What is the soul? What songs and/or psalms can you think of that talk about the soul? Why is it so important?
- Read Matthew 16:24. What does it mean to deny yourself and take up your cross? What would the listeners have thought Jesus was talking about?
- Read Matthew 16:25. This seems backwards doesn't it? How can a person who wants more than anything to keep their life wind up losing it? What gain is there in losing your life for Jesus?
- Read Matthew 16:26. What could Jesus mean by the phrase "to gain the whole world"? How does one forfeit their soul? Is there anything we could give to get our soul back? What value should we place on our soul? Do you care for your soul as though it were that valuable?
- The NIV labels this section of Matthew "Jesus Predicts His Death." How does Jesus model all of this? Can we be confident in following Him?

Pray It

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me. Lord Jesus, You treasure my soul. Sometimes I believe You treasure it more than I do, because You truly know its value and I do not. For all I am chasing in this world, do not let me neglect or forfeit my soul. I entrust it to Your keeping, now and forever, my dear Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In Your name, Amen.

Live It

Ask a friend about their most prized possession and how they keep it safe and protected.