

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.

Have you ever wondered about the center of things? Like where is the center of the United States? In 1918, the geographical center of the US was placed just outside Lebanon, KS. There's a little monument there and a chapel letting you know you are at the center. But in 1959 with the addition of Alaska and Hawaii, the center moved to pastureland near Belle Fourche, SD, also boasting a plaque and an American Flag. If you expand your search to the center of North America, you find yourself a bit more north in Rugby, North Dakota.

If you take your search to Europe, there are many countries that claim to have the center in them...Poland, Belarus, Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine and Estonia. Each place is marked by a monument that claims to be the center point of Europe. But the *Guinness Book of World Records* records a small village in Lithuania to be the true geographical center of Europe. But even it footnotes that depending on the methodology used, other places could be the center.

To find the center point of any given country or continent is an interesting exercise, but is knowing about the center of something important? Purdue University discovered it takes 364 licks to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop. But that was with a licking machine. It only took volunteers an average of 252 licks to get to the center.

But what about things of eternal significance? What about our lives, our souls? We've been looking at what a soul needs all summer...a Savior, purpose, healing mercies, rest. Today we get right to the center of the soul and ponder the claim that the soul needs a center.

Just like the many countries in Europe boldly proclaiming themselves to be the center, there are many, many things in our lives that attempt to convince us that they are the rightful center of our souls. And each one is quite persuasive. *But is there a true center for our souls—a place where our souls can rest assured, content, grounded, safe and anchored?*

Open your Bibles to Matthew 12: 22-30. ²² Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. ²³ All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

²⁵ Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶ If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?

²⁷ And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. ²⁸ But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²⁹ "Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house. ³⁰ "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

The Healing.

Our passage begins with a healing, which is not unusual in Matthew. And this particular healing seems to be one of many—Jesus is fulfilling his role as God's servant who is bringing healing mercies to those in need. This man who is brought to Jesus is blind and unable to speak. Matthew tells us that he is "demon-possessed"—his ailments are the result of the evil and brokenness of the world, the active work of the evil one whose purpose it is to drain the very life out of God's creation. And Jesus heals him so that the man can both talk and see.

The people around see the work of the healer and are astonished, amazed—in wonder. And we are told they are asking the question: "Is it possible this man could be the Son of David?" This is a messianic question—could this be the promised messiah? The people are attracted to Jesus, it's moments like these scattered all through the gospels that we see a people being opened up to the work of the Spirit in their midst.

The Reframe.

But as the passage continues, this hopeful possibility comes into question. Often when hope is nearby, we can usually expect to find another group of contrarians seeing things "differently." And indeed the Pharisees, or the "serious" as Dale Bruner calls them, weigh in on the situation. The Pharisees seem to be always nearby murmuring in the corner, planning little schemes, and trying to undo the powerful work of Jesus. In early chapters of the gospels, they seem annoying, they misunderstand at every turn, but in this story, their words are becoming very serious. In fact they are dead serious about stamping out the light and hope that Jesus is bringing. They begin to spread the teaching that Jesus' work comes from a dark place. The Pharisees reframe the entire scene, not by denying Jesus' power to heal, but by questioning where his power comes from: *Jesus, they say, drives out demons by the prince of demons.*

All through the Gospels Jesus is constantly pointing to God's work in the world showing that His healings are not simply healings, but that they are signs that the Kingdom of God is breaking in. The Pharisees, on the other hand, attempt to offer a different explanation. Jesus' healings, they now contend, are signs that the Kingdom of Satan is at work: a very serious charge.

Earlier in this chapter we read that the Pharisees are busy now plotting Jesus' death (12:14). Theologians help us understand how making such a claim (that Jesus' power comes from Satan) helps their current crusade (Keener: *Matthew*). If the Pharisees can plant the seed that Jesus is using dark spirits, magic or sorcery to heal, that in itself is worthy of capital punishment. Their claim is deliberate, divisive and calculated. As they willingly and purposefully point people away from Jesus, Dale Bruner reminds us to be "on guard against any theology or ideology, however impressive, that distracts from confidence in Jesus as ultimate. Teaching that withdraws faith from Jesus is against the Spirit" (Bruner, *The Christbook*). Beware of anyone who seeks to erode your confidence in Christ alone.

The Reframe (of the Reframe).

As the Pharisees spread their poisonous reframe of what's going on, Jesus responds calmly as he challenges their words. He once again pulls the focus back to the Kingdom of God, reframing the situation again. His words are just as serious as theirs: "Every Kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand" (12:25).

Many think of these words as belonging to Abraham Lincoln in his speech of 1858 about the future of the fragile union of the North and South. And that's right. Similar words were part of a speech Lincoln gave trying to win the senate seat. He was not successful, but he was prophetic about a nation divided over slavery being unable to hold together. Lincoln was quoting Jesus here in Matthew 12. Both he and Jesus are saying similar things: *It is not the nature of a Kingdom to be divided.* If Satan is casting out Satan, that kingdom is divided and will fall. The Pharisees argument does not hold together.

And then Jesus tells a short parable to bring the truth home: "... how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house" (12:29).

Parables themselves are a type of reframing—they push us to think differently about something, they push us to make deeper connections. *Who is the strong man? Who has been plundered? Who is being tied up? What is Jesus saying?*

Last week we looked at the first part of Isaiah 42 which Matthew quotes just before this healing. Let's go a little further in Isaiah 42 to verse 22, to help us understand this parable.

*But this is a people plundered and looted,
all of them trapped in pits
or hidden away in prisons.
They have become plunder,
with no one to rescue them;
they have been made loot,
with no one to say, "Send them back" (Isaiah 42:22).*

The strong man is the devil. And he has plundered and looted the people of God, taking possession of them. He has set up house not only in the man who couldn't see or speak, but in the people of God. *Who will rescue the people?* There is only One who can rescue, who can tie up the devil, take back what the devil has stolen, plunder what the devil has taken captive and free the people of God.

The point is this: The devil is strong, yes. But only One stronger than the devil can defeat him. Jesus is taking back what Satan has taken one by one, life by life, person by person. Jesus is stronger than the strong man.

- *Where is sin getting the best of you?*
- *Where is it pulling you off center?*
- *Where do you feel ungrounded, shifting, divided or scattered?*
- *Where is the strong man at work in your life?*
- *And where in your life does the stronger man need to break in and defeat sin?*

Jesus is very clear in this passage that there are two kingdoms at work in our lives: the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan. And just to be clear: they are not equal. One is stronger than the other. As Jesus speaks, the goals of each Kingdom become crystal clear. The central work of the evil one is strong: he divides, ruins, possesses, scatters and disintegrates life. He has no interest in your well-being. But the central work of Jesus is stronger: He heals, gathers, sets free, strengthens, brings wholeness and an integrated life. Jesus knit you together in your mother's womb, and he continues to knit your soul together piece by piece so that we can say with confidence, "it is well with my soul."

The Centered Soul.

The Scriptures teach us much about a life centered on God.

Psalms 62:1-2: *Truly my soul finds rest in God;
my salvation comes from him.*

² *Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.*

The Psalmist speaks truth: my soul finds rest in God alone. Only in Jesus do we find our souls centered, undivided and at rest. Jesus affirms again and again the steadiness and firm foundation of a life centered on Him. "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose,

and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock" (Matthew 7:24-25). So many voices call out to our souls: *Build your life here. Organize your life by these principles. You struggle with this? Then you need to work harder on these things. What is calling out to you today begging you to put it at the center of your soul?* Anything that pulls you away from faith in Christ alone is simply a pile of sand. It will not hold you because it cannot hold your soul. But the Spirit of God calls to your soul, whispers to your heart. Deep calls to deep. Only in God is my soul at rest. Only Jesus can hold your soul.

Signs you are Centered on Jesus:

So just a few thoughts for you to take home and ponder from our passage—I'll call them "signs that you are centered on Jesus."

Leaning In.

We have two pictures in our passage of two different postures: Those who are leaning in to the Kingdom of God, and those who are leaning away. Wherever Jesus is speaking, teaching, healing, showing up, those around Him are opening up to Him and the possibility of who He is. *Could this be the One we've been waiting for?* There is energy, and hope, a simplicity of priority and a child-like anticipation – a *leaning in* to the Spirit of God.

John Ortberg writes in his book, *Soul Keeping*, "People whose souls are rooted in a center find it brings clarity to their decisions." There is an ease in life when we are leaning into Christ. We aren't blown around by every temptation, every whim, every voice that calls out to us to notice them. There is a clarity to our steps.

It was *Shark Week* last week, and if you don't know what that is, I don't have time to help you today. So, I'll simply invite you to lean in next summer. Every year I learn something that is really vital to my life, like Michael Phelps can swim faster than a reef shark, but not a great white shark or a hammerhead. Or that bull sharks can live in salt water and fresh water. These things are really important for us to know. But what I learned this year is that there is real thing called a "fish magnet," also called a "fish aggregating device." A fish magnet is a magnet that draws fish in towards it so that fishermen have the possibility of getting a larger catch in their nets. Besides the ethical feeling you may have about this practice, our souls lean toward Jesus like a magnet because Jesus is our soul's true center.

Are you leaning in to Jesus this morning? Are you allowing His Word to frame your day-to-day life?

Astonishment and Wonder.

A second sign that your soul is centered on Jesus is this: you experience regularly awe and wonder about this life you've been given. Your imagination is alive with possibilities because you are close to the One who made your imagination, who gave you the ability to dream and who never ceases to do wonders and miracles in your life that you never thought possible.

The disturbing thing about the Pharisees is they are never astonished, or amazed at anything Jesus does. Their imaginations seem dead, frozen, hardened. As I tucked in my daughter to sleep the other night, I made the random comment that magic is not real. She looked at me with consternation and replied, "Mom your killing my imagination." Sorry.

When our souls are centered on Christ, we are full of wonder and awe. When was the last time you stopped to look at a sunset and were overcome with the incredible beauty of it all? When was the

last time you prayed for someone who was hurting and were given a beautiful picture of them clothed in wholeness?

Life is too short to dwell in cynicism and hard heartedness. When we are centered on Jesus, our amazement of God increases and a child-like wonder invades our souls.

Gathering with Jesus.

Our final sign is “gathering with Jesus.” The passage ends with severe words from Jesus. “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (12:30). Our lives are either about gathering people with Jesus or scattering them away from Him. It’s clear which kingdom is about which.

I’ve talked before about the importance of a family rhythm of gathering. Each year more and more research shows that one of the most important practices a family can do together is weekly family dinners. And the more frequent the better. I mention this because we are getting ready to head back into the school year—where anything and everything has the potential to become more important than the togetherness of the family. The scattering effect that takes place after August 15th around our families is mind-blowing. So, now, before that all rushes in, make decisions now to mark off on the calendar family dinner nights. The practice of simply gathering the family around the table, for a meal with laughter, open conversation and prayer together can save miles of heartache in the future. Studies show that such a practice reduces drug use, teen pregnancy and devastating choices that all of our children will face at some point.

But when I talk about this practice, this is not just for the family unit who lives together. This is for all of us. *Who is your family group this year?* We all need to be on the lookout for who doesn’t have a family yet. College students will be arriving soon who are far from home. There are those who are living on their own and in need of table fellowship. Let’s gather together—and let there be food.

When our souls are centered on Jesus, we can’t help but bring people with us to Christ’s table—to be healed by Him, to have an encounter with Him. When our souls are centered on Jesus, we become gatherers—gathering up those around us and bringing them with us to Jesus. Lean In. Be amazed. Gather with others.

I close with a prayer that was written a very long time ago. This prayer was put down on paper in the 1100s by Isaac of Stella and based on Psalm 62:1: “My soul finds rest in God alone.” I invite you to close your eyes and take a moment to breathe. Allow the presence of God to reframe this moment for you as a Kingdom moment. Lean into Christ.

May the Son of God who is already formed in you, grow in you, so that for you He will become immeasurable, and that in you He will become laughter, exultation, the fullness of joy which no one can take from you.

Amen.

STUDY GUIDE

“What a Soul Needs: A Center”

Matthew 12:22-30

Start It

- Think about your life growing up. What was at the center of your family life? What relationships, events, experiences, etc. did your life together get organized around?
- Are those same things still organizing principles in your life now? Why or why not?

Study It

- Read Matthew 12:22-30.
- What observations do you make about this text? What words or phrases jump out at you, or get repeated? What questions does this passage raise?
- How are the people responding to Jesus? What do their reactions to Jesus say about what is going on in their hearts?
- What is going on in the minds of the Pharisees? What is their plan or purpose? See also Matthew 12:14.
- Jesus confronts the Pharisees first with reason (vs. 25-28), and then with a parable (vs.29). What is Jesus’ logic about the nature of a kingdom?
- What is the point of this little parable (vs. 29)? Who is the strong man? Who or what has been looted and plundered? Who has tied up the strong man? See Isaiah 42:22.
- How does this passage speak to us about the soul needing a center? Who is our center?
- Reflect together on John Ortberg’s statement: “When the soul is not centered one is never sure what temptations are worth resisting or what sacrifices are worth making.” (*Soul Keeping*)

Pray It

Take a moment or two to be still with one another. After some time of quiet together, have someone pray over your group being guided by our text today.

Live It

Pay attention this week to what voices are encouraging you to find your center in them. How strong are those voices? Remember Jesus’ parable of the strong man and ask Jesus to be your center.