

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 FOOD • Matthew 12:31-37 • Katie Fowler • August 6, 2017

Earlier this summer, my husband Chuck and I did a 31-day sugar detox. Life kept piling up on us. We got busy and we had a baby and we got to a point of needing to ask are we eating what we should be eating? Are our bodies getting the nourishment they need? And I need you to picture us having this conversation over a piece of cake.

All summer we have been exploring what the soul needs. Your soul, the core of who you are, your deepest self – what does your soul need? Today we will explore this idea that our soul needs food. And not just any food – but the food that actually brings life, the food that allows you to flourish, the things that actually nourish your soul.

What are you feeding your soul these days?

As we'll discover today, the good news rings out from God's Word. The Lord desires to feed you. He is the food that satisfies.

Passage: Matthew 12:31-37

³¹ And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³² Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

³³ "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. ³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. ³⁵ A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. ³⁶ But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. ³⁷ For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

Our passage today picks up with where we left off last week. The tension is escalating between Jesus and the Pharisees, who are some of the religious leaders of Jesus' day. The Pharisees have accused Jesus of being in league with the Evil One. They are drawing a dangerous line in the sand, setting themselves up against Jesus and his work. Jesus says be careful – your words matter. Your words reveal something deeper.

Jesus recognizes the real problem is not simply the Pharisees' words, their condemning speech, but the real problem is what's going on inside of them.

As Pastor Tim has said throughout this sermon series, most problems are soul problems. Most problems are soul problems. And with incredibly strong language, Jesus says in verse 34: "You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of." Their accusations against Jesus showed what was really going on inside of them.

And then in our key verse for today, Jesus says this in verse 35: "...a good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him." In other words, what's in you is going to come out of you. If it's bad in, it's bad out. If it's good in, it's good out. *And this begs the question: What is being stored up in you? What are you feeding your soul?*

I recently read the story of a young woman named Stacey. Since the age of two, Stacey has eaten a diet almost exclusively of chicken nuggets. At the age of 17, she was rushed to the hospital, her body desperately deficient of the needed nutrients and vitamins. After being hospitalized and meeting with doctors, Stacey said I am starting to realize this is really bad for me. Now, this story first appeared in a British tabloid magazine before it was picked up by other news outlets, so I am not sure how accurate it is – but it paints a picture of how out of whack we can get.

And what about our souls? We can recognize when our bodies aren't getting the nourishment they need, but what about your soul? Can you tell when your soul is malnourished? Can you tell when your soul is starving for real food? For me, I start to feel the signs of my soul being malnourished, when I eat a steady diet of busyness, when I feed my soul nothing but hurry and hustle, when my life becomes one giant to do list with no slowing down in sight. My soul feels malnourished when I feed it anxiety and worry, taking God out of the equation and instead chewing on my fears for today and my worries about tomorrow. My soul feels malnourished when I feed it constant noise, constant distractions, my phone going off all the time, when I am more present to my social media feed than my people around me.

Author Pete Santucci describes the times his soul is starving like this:

*Too much entertainment, not enough reflection.
Too much gossip, not enough prayer.
Too much ego, not enough community...*

...Too much wanting, not enough enjoying what I have...

*Too much fear, not enough hope.
Too much lust, not enough love.
Too much noise, not enough silence.
Too much talking, not enough listening...*

*...Too much rushing, not enough resting.
Too much doing, not enough being.
Too much of me, not enough of God.*

Can you tell when your soul is starving for real food? I would suggest if you are feeling drained, disconnected, distracted, if you are acting cranky, crabby – if your loved one would describe you using words like irritable and if you notice that everything makes you irate. It is a good time to examine your life and ask what have I been feeding my soul lately?

I am starting to realize there has got to be other food, better food for my soul. What are you feeding your soul? And here again is the warning of Jesus. Pay attention to what you are storing up in you – it is going to come out of you.

You see, for the human soul, it is only too true, you are what you eat. You have heard that expression *you are what you eat*. It makes me think of the character Violet from the classic Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. She is greedy and grabby. She refuses to listen to those around her, she takes Willy Wonka's gum and gobbles it up. And what happens? One minute she is chewing away, tasting the blueberries and then the next minute, she becomes a blueberry. Literally. I am starting to realize, by the way,

the stories we tell our kids are terrifying. But all around us, we see these examples--you are what you eat.

I think about my friend, hurt and bitter, just ate anger. She feasted on bitterness. Days turned to months to years, now even decades. Her steady diet of bitterness has taken its toll. I think about our culture driven by fear, division, us vs. them. We chew and chew on it. And it takes its toll.

Some say the expression you are what you eat was first really brought into common understanding by a Frenchman writing in the 1820s. His words were literally translated like this: *tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are*. And our passage today reminds us, for the human soul, it is only too true that you are what you eat.

Your soul will reflect the food it is being fed. Bad in, bad out. But if it is good in, if it's the stuff that makes you more human, not less – if it's the food that connects us with God and with others and with the life we were made for – if good in, it is good out.

So what's the good food for our soul? Where do we find it?

There's all sorts of good food for the soul – the things that bring joy, connection, beauty and delight to your life. It's the community, the listening and reflection, the hope, the love, the just being/ the resting that Pete Santucci wrote about. But ultimately, all these good things point us to the deeper soul food that we read about in Scripture.

You see at one point in Jesus' ministry, a huge crowd gathers around Jesus. Where can they get bread for all these people? There is a boy there with five small loaves of bread and two small fish. And Jesus takes that small offering and He blesses it and gives it to the disciples to pass out to the people. When it is all said and done, He feeds 5,000 men, not including the women and children who are there. It's astonishing. A miraculous sign of who Jesus is and of what Jesus is here to do. And then Jesus leaves. He goes off and the crowd goes in search of Jesus. The crowd wants more. When they find Jesus, He says I filled your stomachs and you want more. But let me tell you – there is a different kind of food. He says do not work for food that is just going to spoil, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.

The crowd asks him, "What must we do to do the work God requires?" Jesus answers them by saying: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." (John 6:29) And Jesus tells them more about this other kind of food, this food that endures to eternal life. He says, "...the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." (John 6:33)

The bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life. Jesus says I AM. "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)

Our passage in Matthew today is a hard passage. There are things that Jesus says that make you want to scratch your head and wonder what they mean?

Remember the Pharisees in our passage have drawn a dangerous line in the sand, setting themselves up against Jesus and his

Kingdom work, trying to pull people away from Jesus. And Jesus warns them about they are doing.

In verse 31 Jesus says, "And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven." Jesus goes on to say that "anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." (v. 32) I remember being troubled by that verse when I was a kid, afraid I would accidentally say the wrong thing and commit the unforgivable sin. But as many have pointed out, if you are worrying about such a thing that worry actually shows you are not guilty of doing it. Because what Jesus is talking about is something else – a persistent, willing hard-heartedness, setting yourself up against the Holy Spirit, who is the giver of life, the One who draws us to the Lord.

Last week, Pastor Jennifer quoted Scholar Dale Bruner who said this, "Teaching that withdraws faith from Jesus is against the Spirit." For it's Jesus who has the words of eternal life. It's Jesus – Jesus who is the true bread of heaven come down for our rescue, sent by God the Father with healing in His wings. It's Jesus, who offers Himself to us, for us. It's Jesus who though He was without sin became sin on our behalf.

This bread, I offer, Jesus says, is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

It's Jesus who offers up His life as a sacrifice on the cross, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. It's Jesus who defeats death, overwhelming the grave. It's Jesus who brings us into His Resurrection life. It's Jesus who says I am the bread of life.

To quote Dale Bruner again: "Jesus is claiming in his own person to be that for which all human beings most long." Those hunger pains deep within you – pay attention to them. The feeling inside your gut that there must be more to life than all the noise and hustle – all the cheap food and empty calories we try to feed our souls, pay attention to it. The craving, the desire. As deep cries out to deep, as the Holy Spirit draws you in, draws you closer and closer to Jesus. Jesus is the one for which all human beings most long.

Earlier this summer, at the beginning of the sermon series, we handed out these soul fitness cards. They listed seven practices to try this summer, providing space to be with Jesus. There are cards available as you leave if you need to pick up another one. What are the practices that just open up space in your life that allow you to be with Jesus?

Jesus is the one for which all human beings most long. And as Dale Bruner points out, the invitation, the invitation from Jesus, is simply to come. (*The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, pg. 400) We simply come. So often we ask what must we do, what's the work. That's so often our question. The grace of Jesus cuts through all of that striving and straining. This is the work. Jesus says believe – look to me and trust me.

Our son Luke recently started eating solid food. He caught on so quickly to how it all works. A few days into this new adventure of eating solid food, my baby boy would simply open his mouth as I brought the spoon to his lips. I would sit down to feed him and he would open his mouth wide to receive – to simply receive the food his parents had for him.

We try to dress ourselves up for Jesus – fix our hair, straighten the tie, get our act together. But the grace of Jesus cuts through all of that. Simply come, open your mouth, open your hands, simply receive.

The prophet Isaiah puts it like this (Isaiah 55):

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;
and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.
Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.”

Friends, what Jesus is setting before us is the richest of foods. This is the Living God saying I have prepared a feast for you. For you, I have moved heaven and earth. For you, I have laid down my life. For you, I have conquered the grave. Jesus longs to feed you. He is the food that satisfies.

In a dry and weary land where there is no water, the Lord God will be your sustenance. When the road is long, when your knees are weak and your heart is weary, He will prepare a table before you. Come, buy, and eat. Eat what is good. Discover again that the Lord’s love is better than life, and you will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods. Taste and see that the Lord is good. The Lord longs to feed you. He is the food that satisfies.

That’s what this table, this meal is about. Communion is one of two sacraments in the Presbyterian tradition. A sacrament is a visible outward sign of an inward reality of grace. God’s grace tangibly at work. We come to this table and through the Holy Spirit, we are united with the Risen Lord Jesus. For the Lord longs to feed us here – not just to talk about food. That’s the worst just to talk about food – no, the Lord wants us be nourished by Him today.

Are there places in your soul that are famished for what only Jesus can supply? Hear these words from N.T. Wright:

“Jesus – the real Jesus, the living Jesus, the Jesus who dwells in heaven and rules over earth as well, the Jesus who has brought God’s future into the present – wants not just to influence us, but to rescue us; not just to inform us, but to heal us, not just to give us something to think about, but to feed us, and to feed us with himself. That’s what this meal is about.”
-N.T. Wright, (*Simply Christian*, pg. 154)

Oh, how I pray that you would know that today Jesus, the real Jesus, the living Jesus, the Bread of Life, wants not just to influence you, but to rescue you. Not just to inform you, but to heal you. Not just to give you something to think about, but to feed you, to feed you with Himself. He is the food that satisfies. Your job is to open your mouth, open your hands and receive.

STUDY GUIDE

“What a Soul Needs: Soul Food”

Matthew 12:31-37

Start It

- What’s one of the best meals you have ever had? What made it so special? So memorable? What was on the menu? Sharing a meal with friends or family, eating good food, enjoying good conversation. These are not insignificant things. Scripture talks a lot about food. But God’s word also points us to the deeper food our soul needs. The Lord Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35)

Study It

- Read Matthew 12:31-37. What word or phrase jumps out to you? In what ways does that word or phrase seem significant to your life right now?
- Let’s look again at the context of our passage. Who is Jesus speaking to? (If you need to, jump back to earlier in chapter 12.)
- In verses 31 and 32, what warning does Jesus give to the Pharisees? Scholar Dale Bruner says, “Teaching that withdraws faith from Jesus is against the Spirit.” With this quote in mind, what does it mean to speak against the Holy Spirit (verse 32)?
- In our passage, Jesus says that one’s words reveal what is really going on inside of you. “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” Yes, our words matter, but they also point to something deeper. Read again verse 35. What is Jesus saying here? How would you put this verse in your own words?
- As we see in verse 35, what’s in you is going to come out of you. It matters what we are “feeding” our souls. What do you think is a good, healthy diet for your soul? What is the “good food” for your soul? What is the “bad food” for your soul?
- Read John 6:25-35. What does it mean that Jesus is the bread of life?
- Jesus longs to feed us. He is the food that satisfies. The psalmist reminds us in Psalm 107, “he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.” How has the Lord met you in your hunger and need? With what good things has the Lord filled you?

Pray It

Lord, you have the words of eternal life. Where else could I go? Whom do I have in heaven but You? Feed us, Lord, we pray. Satisfy us with Your presence. We thank You, Lord, that You are all we need. We bring our hunger before You. May we find again today that Your grace is sufficient. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Live It

Spend some time this week in silence or solitude. Try it for even just 10 minutes. As you begin your time, read Isaiah 55:1-2. Ask the Lord to satisfy you.