

Message: Our Needy Soul

Pastor John Ortberg said, “Your soul is like a sinkhole.”¹ It’s an interesting thought and it led to research on sinkholes this week. It’s amazing what you can find online. Sinkholes come in all shapes and sizes. They all have the same, basic cause. Water erodes the underlying structure over time. You can’t tell by looking until, one day, there’s a shift. What appeared to be stable, whole and dependable collapses, revealing a hole. A sinkhole will draw other material and anyone nearby into it, continuing to collapse until it’s filled – at least temporarily.

That sounds like a person with a wounded soul. Everything seems fine until one day when a collapse occurs. Other people and things are drawn into the situation until the wound is bandaged. But it’s a temporary fix; there are deeper issues which need to be addressed.

Our souls are like sinkholes because they’re needy. A sinkhole in the earth needs things of the earth to fill it. Our souls are like sinkholes because we have desires which need to be filled. We have unfilled or unmet spiritual needs. The Hebrew word for soul in this case is *nephesh* (הנפש). It implies a needy person, a person battling with two challenges: our limits and our expectations.

Our first challenge: we all have limits. We’re limited in every way: our intelligence, strength, energy and morality. And there are so many ways we try to fool others and ourselves. We apply topical treatments to make us appear younger, even as we get older. We buy products to make us thinner, even as we get fatter. We read self-help books to help us feel better, even though we keep on following self-destructive habits and patterns. We invest in medications and systems to prolong our life, knowing we’re going to die. We sacrifice quality of life for quantity and temporary things in life.

Author Kent Dunnington wrote, “We’re limited in every way but one: we have unlimited desire.”² Sounds like a sinkhole waiting to happen.

Our second challenge is our expectations. We always want more: more time, more wisdom, more beauty, more funny videos on YouTube,

¹ Some material drawn from John Ortberg, *Soulkeeping*, Zondervan, 2014

² *Ibid*, p. 82

etc. And that’s not counting the “big three” – more money, power and fame. For example, one of the latest trends indicates importance is busy-ness. If you *aren’t* getting texts or calls during an evening meal with your significant others or at all hours of the day, seven days a week, then you must not be important (or at least self-important.)

John Wesley, and other spiritual leaders, have a different view.

He said, “*Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day. We must eliminate hurry from our life.*”³

We all have problems with our limitations and expectations. It’s a human condition. We have problems because we deny, ignore or pass on to others things that are really our responsibility. The care of your soul is your responsibility. No one else can take care of it. Ignoring our responsibility only postpones the day when a collapse will come, revealing a hole in our carefully manufactured façade.

That’s when our wounded soul is revealed, crying out. The problem with our soul isn’t with its neediness. God made us to have limits. Thomas Aquinas said, “*There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning.*”⁴ Our needs are meant to point the way to God. There are two things getting in the way. First, instead of turning to God, we choose to fill our mind, body and will with anything else. The habits and patterns of our mind and body are well-established.

We have another problem: we often don’t know what our souls are truly devoted to. Most people, especially those who go to church regularly, would probably say their souls are devoted to God or a higher calling or an ideal. We want to believe that’s true, even as we devote our souls to something else.

Let’s do a little experiment on our soul’s devotion. It’s a self-assessment. You don’t need to tell anyone what your answers are. I’ll read several statements. Consider them as honestly as possible. If any of them resemble your thoughts, it’s possible you may have discovered the true devotion of your soul:

³ *Ibid*, p. 20

⁴ <https://www.christianquotes.info/quotes-by-author/thomas-aquinas-quotes/?listpage=2&instance=2#participants-list-2>

- ***I think about money a lot.***
I fantasize about winning the lottery. I have a mental wish list of all the things I’d buy if money were no object.
- ***I wish I had more control over others.***
It seems like others don’t respect me enough at home, work or church. I know I’d handle it carefully - I just want more power or influence.
- ***I missed important family events to pursue my career.***
I justify it by telling my family I need to do it to provide for them. I keep telling myself I’ll get that break - one day.
- ***I have desires I prefer not to have my spouse or others know about.*** If I am confronted about any of those desires, I become defensive and try to justify it.
- ***I consider myself an honest person, someone with good values.***
But I would set those values aside to pursue something important to me if I knew no one else would know.
- ***If my doctor told me I had to give up (alcohol, cigarettes, red meat, salt/sugar, etc.) because it was putting my health at risk,*** I would find it difficult to impossible. I wouldn’t want anyone to know.
- ***If you asked my family what was most important to me,*** they would most likely refer to my job, hobby, money, social media, friends, etc. They would probably not say it was them.
- ***I have secrets I am willing to lie to protect.***
- ***I love Jesus, and I want to follow him more closely.*** But there’s one thing that always seems to get in the way. It’s _____.

Thomas Aquinas said, “*The things that we love tell us who we are.*”⁵

If our soul is devoted to something which becomes more important than God, we’re following a modern-day idol. To make things worse, we can’t give up our idol by sheer willpower. It’s like an alcoholic

⁵ <https://www.christianquotes.info/quotes-by-author/thomas-aquinas-quotes/?listpage=2&instance=2#participants-list-2>

trying to become sober by promising themselves they won't drink anymore. It doesn't work. We need help. We need to be honest with ourselves. Most of all, nothing will be effective until we want to change.

Our desires can become addictive, leading us to sin, the corrosive force digging away at our soul. Our addictions are often nice things like food, shopping, recreation, hobbies and pleasure. On the face of it, these aren't bad. But casual enjoyment can change, slowly and surely, to addiction, if we aren't careful.

This is where grace comes in. We can't replace an idol - our addiction to other things, by turning away from it. We need to turn *toward* something or someone. We need a new passion. We need to find something outside of ourselves or the things in the world – good as they may be.

There's hope. Our soul's infinite capacity to desire is only matched by God's infinite capacity to give. That's what grace and love mean. Jesus stands in the intersection between our greatest fear and perfect love.

What if the real reason we feel like we never have enough is God isn't finished giving? If you haven't found joy yet, you need to be willing to accept and receive the love and grace of God – directly and through others. It should be easy. But we make it hard. Our ego gets involved. We want to receive God's grace, but we want it on our terms. We want love our way.

There's only one problem: we're stuck in a sinkhole. We can't see out. Only God can. We need to trust God. We need to watch for where God sends the Spirit to help us, guiding us to the lifeline we can grasp onto to get out of our predicament.

The lifeline is Jesus. He helps us in ways we don't expect. When Peter and the disciples thought they “had it,” Jesus challenged them. The way to find healing for your soul is surrender and self-sacrifice, not self-sufficiency (Matthew 16:23-26; 1 Cor. 12:9-10). There's a paradox. We can't heal our own soul. Only God can do that. It takes love and forgiveness in unconditional measures. That's what God's grace gives when we're ready to accept it.

We need to admit we can’t fill the hole in our soul on our own.

We need forgiveness to remove the corrosive power of sin on our soul. This is how we begin to heal. This is how we’re restored. This is how we become whole. It’s the way of selfless love. When we live this way, we freely put others first – family, friends, those we meet who are in need. Yes, it’s counter-cultural and counter-intuitive, but it’s the way Jesus calls us to follow.

Where does the spiritual path lead us? We don’t have to look far. We see two different paths when we look at Jesus’ disciples. *First is Judas*, the path of betrayal and remorse. He regretted turning Jesus over to the authorities. Judas couldn’t deal with what was revealed. The grass wasn’t greener on the other side of the fence. *Second is Peter*, who started on the path of fear. When Peter denied knowing Jesus, he was watching out for his own skin! He knew better. That’s why Peter wept bitterly, ran away and hid out in a room, waiting to see if he would be arrested by the authorities.

But there’s good news: it’s not the end of the story! John’s narrative captures the scene. Peter and the apostles are fishing when they’re interrupted. They end up having an amazing encounter with the risen Jesus on the shore. Three times Jesus asks Peter if he (Peter) “truly loves” him (Jesus). Peter could only say he was “fond” of Jesus. The Lord restored Peter, even when he wasn’t “all in.” Jesus gave Peter work to do, caring for others, teaching them and spreading the message of the movement. Peter’s devotion was so great he led, even when it was difficult and threatening, even when it led to his death at the hands of Rome. Peter truly loved Jesus in the end.

What does our love for Jesus look like? Maybe, like Peter, you aren’t “all in” yet.

Jesus asks, “Do you truly love me?” (John 21:16)

How will you respond? Believe in Jesus. His love and grace will fill your desires. Admit you need him. Trust God and really, truly surrender. Make Jesus your daily need. No holding back! Surrender isn’t popular, easy or quick, but it’s what heals. It fills the needs of our

soul. Jesus will take us as we are and make our souls greater than we could ever imagine.

I invite you to join me and all who have gone before us on this spiritual journey, as we walk in the way Jesus shows us.

Let us pray ...

Lord, thank you for making us the way we are. Thank you for giving us bodies, minds and the freedom to choose. Thank you for our soul, the deep, mysterious part of us always reaching out, seeking a connection with you. Help us to embrace and accept your love and grace. Teach us to trust you and to love so our soul may be healthy. Unite our will, mind and body in our love for you, for each other and for those we do not yet know. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Psalm 42:3-5 (CEB)

My tears have been my food both day and night,
as people constantly questioned me,
“Where’s your God now?”

But I remember these things as I bare my soul:
how I made my way to the mighty one’s abode,
to God’s own house,
with joyous shouts and thanksgiving songs -
a huge crowd celebrating the festival!

Why, I ask myself, are you so depressed?

Why are you so upset inside?

Hope in God!

Because I will again give him thanks,
my saving presence and my God.