



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.¹ 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 1 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—speak-

ing, 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.²

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. 5—7, John 14—17, 1 Cor. 13, and Col. 3 are terrific “soul growing” selections. This practice of memorizing the Scriptures is more important