

Considering the Soul

Jesus said: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” This passage from our Gospel reading this morning has always intrigued me. Not only because the language is edgy and stark, but because of the depth it communicates. In this one verse we get a sense of who we are as created beings. For starters, the verse makes it clear that we are a compound of body and soul. That is, our overall makeup is dualistic composed of two distinct substances, which work harmoniously together. We have bodies, which are composed of physical properties, physical characteristics, and physical parts. But we are more than just our bodies. We also have souls. Christ makes it clear that the soul is different from the body, for while the body can be killed, the soul cannot, except only by God. This means that there is something immortal and indestructible about the soul that sets it apart from the outward body. In view of this mysterious and impervious substance dwelling within each of us, you would think that the concept of the soul would receive a great deal of attention. Sadly, though, it does not. Think about it: when was the last time you gave any thought to the origin and nature of your soul? I suppose this lack of attention is to be expected seeing how mankind has been reduced to little more than chemical and biological functions. Evolutionary teachings have cast doubt on the idea that mankind is unique in this world, and instead seeks to place humans on the same taxonomical level as other species in the animal kingdom. Anthropology and sociology no longer focus on the special nature of mankind within the pattern of the universe, but focus instead on the progression and adaptation of Homo sapiens throughout the millennia. And this public rhetoric does something to our thinking. We are inadvertently influenced by the muddled jargon; so much so that we fail to grasp our unique place in the cosmos or the special status God afforded us when He created us in His image. So let’s spend a little time this morning exploring the concept of the soul and see if we can’t clear up some of the misconceptions. What does it mean to have a soul? And how is it different from the souls of say

plants and animals? To say something has a soul is the same as saying something is alive. Everything living has a soul. But there are distinctions, which need to be made. For while plants and animals have souls, which provide for the basics of existence- nourishment, growth, reproduction, sensation, perception and movement only human beings have rational souls. Our souls are unique in that they are responsible not only for the basics of our survival, but also for thinking, reflecting, reasoning and remembering.

This uniqueness is what it means to be made in the image of God. God created every living thing with a soul, but only human beings were created with a soul patterned on His own image and likeness. The human soul is the core of our being, the center of our existence, the seat of our consciousness; mind, love, knowledge, memory, will, and intellect are all essentially found within the soul. The fact that we are having this conversation, that we can think about the soul in this way- its properties, its function, and its powers- proves we have a rational soul for only human beings can practice such introspection and self-reflection. Human beings are the only living thing on this earth that can observe, reflect and judge and then think about our observations, reflections and judgements. Or to say it more simply only human beings can think about thinking.

So our souls are unique in that they are the storehouse of our collected memories, experiences and perceptions. But let's go further, and ask, "What for?" What is the purpose of the soul? This question brings us nearer to the mind of God for in answering it we uncover the greatness of the soul. For the soul is uniquely situated to bridge heaven and earth. The soul is active, actively directing the movements of our body, regulating our passions and desires, and controlling our emotional responses, and in this way our souls are grounded to the earth. But the soul is also passive, receiving from God His higher revelation, His higher will, and His higher wisdom, and therefore it is heavenly. By means of the soul we share in the mind of God in that we can think about higher things and set our minds on things above. And we do this using first our outward bodily vision and then, in turn, using our inner vision of the soul. We encounter

this world through particular outward things and objects. But from these particulars we move to universal concepts. For example I see a particular tree. But my mind moves quickly from the particular to the universal as it places that particular species of tree, let's say a red maple, within the broader genus of maple trees, and then further still into the broader family of all trees, whether that be pine or oak or the like. And though we do this effortlessly without giving it much thought this type of reasoning is a reflection of God within us. Having a rational soul means we can trace the created pattern of the world. That is we can explore, engage, learn and enjoy the order and beauty of the universe. And what we do by natural reason as we move from particulars to universals, we can also do on a higher plane by the gift of faith as we move from the temporal to eternal. Faith redirects our inner vision not only to move from particulars to universals, but also to see the eternal attributes of God hidden behind the temporal affairs of this world. St. Paul describes this heavenly vision of the soul when he says, "Since the creation of the world God's invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made even His eternal power and Godhead". By extracting the eternal from the temporal we are able to contemplate the Creator and commune with the Divine.

This I believe is what Jesus had in mind when He said don't fear those who can destroy the body only, but fear God who can destroy both body and soul. It is a lesson in transcendence. It is a process of detachment from this life in order that we might meditate on the higher realities of God Himself. For our souls are destined for even greater things than this world. Our souls are destined to be reunited with God Himself in the eternal fellowship of His presence in a world without end. And with this wonderful homecoming in mind why would we ever fear the things of this world or what anyone can do to us. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy Mills