

Title: "Cultivating the Inward Dimension"
Text: Matthew 16:24-28; Psalm 103:1-18

We are continuing in our series of sermons on "Living Faith in 3D,"

-and seeking to grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ really is.

Last week our focus was on cultivating the upward dimension of our faith life,

-and we looked at the psalms as models of how people in generations past opened their lives upward to God,
-and invited God into every dimension of their lives.

-The psalms are what cultivating an upward relationship with God looks like,

-and I encourage you to spend time in the psalms and allow them to teach you how to cultivate your upward relationship with God.

Today our focus is on the inward dimension of a 3D life of faith.

-And the question is how do we cultivate our own souls, so that we are experiencing the length and breadth and height and depth of God's love for us?

Turn with me to the Gospel of Matthew 16:21-28.

-Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem,

-and he talks to them about how he is going to suffer and die there, but be raised on the third day.

-They cannot believe this is going to happen to him, and reject that idea completely.

-So listen to what Jesus then teaches them about the upside down ways of the Kingdom of God,
-and about saving and losing one's soul.

The Greek word for "soul" is the word "psyche" from which we get our word for "Psychology," the study of the soul.

-It is used four times in this passage,

-though twice it is translated as "life,"

-and twice it is translated literally as "soul."

Jesus says, *“For whoever wants to save their life (psyche) will lose it, but whoever loses their life (psyche) for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul (psyche)? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul (psyche)?”*

And there is no problem with translating this word in both ways, even in one passage.

-As the NIV text note at the bottom of the page says, the word psyche can mean either “life” or “soul,”
-and the way in which one translates it has to do with the context.

And in this context, Jesus does actually begin talking to his disciples about saving or losing one’s life, their physical life.

-He has told them that he is going to Jerusalem and that he will actually lose his life there.
-He will be killed on a cross. He will suffer and die.
-And it is this they are objecting to.

So he is telling them that the attempt to hang onto one’s “life” at all costs, actually causes one to lose his/her life.

-But whoever is willing to take up their cross, and die for Jesus and the gospel,
-will amazingly enough discover that they gain more life than they ever thought possible.
-A far richer life now in the body, and an eternal life in the Kingdom to come.

But then Jesus takes that same word for life (psyche),

-and he goes on to use it in a deeper way,
-and the translators are right to understand the shift in the context, and to shift the translation to the English word soul.

In verse 26, Jesus asks what good it is for a person to not only hang onto this physical life,

-but to seek during this physical life to gain every earthly wealth and pleasure he or she can get their hands upon.
-What good is it for a person to “get it all,” Jesus asks,
-but to lose their soul?

You see, in the context of this question, Jesus isn't just talking about losing one's physical life.

- He's talking about a person losing something deeper.
- This inner dimension of the human life, which is our soul.

And as we talked about a couple of weeks ago,

- our soul is that uniquely human, multi-dimensional combination of our mind, our will, our emotions, and our personality,
- all wrapped up in this human body which makes us who we are as a person, created in the image of God.

Our soul is not just some inner spiritual part of us that is located somewhere inside our beating heart.

- No, in the Bible the soul is the totality of who we are.
- It is our whole life,
- and includes our thoughts, our wills, our emotions,
- as well as our looks, and our personality, and temperament.

Your soul is what makes you "you."

- And what makes me "me." It's the whole person we are.

And Jesus asks here, what good does it do any of us to try at all costs to hang onto this human life in the body,

- without ever cultivating our soul?
- Who we are, who God created us to be?

And what good does it do any of us to try and gain the whole world, with all its bells and whistles,

- the money, sex, and power, fame, fortune, and fun,
- but somehow in the process lose ourselves;
- forfeit who we truly are?
- Forfeit our souls, the person God created us to be?

And there are countless stories of people in every generation from Adam and Eve's son Cain,

- all the way down to Harvey Weinstein in 2017 Hollywood, who have grabbed for everything they could get,
- and have ended up losing their souls.

But today I'd like to look with you at the flip side of the coin.

What does it look like for us to actually gain our souls, and not lose them?

- How do we “deny ourselves, and take up the cross, and follow Jesus in such a way that we find life in true life, -and gain our souls?

We know, as Jesus says here in verse 26, that we can’t actually give anything to God in exchange for our souls.

- We can’t buy our way into heaven, or barter with God, or save our own souls.
- Only God can save our soul, and heal our soul, and make our souls “whole.”

But Jesus is calling his disciples here to be stewards of their souls.

- He is calling them to take steps to follow him in a path of discipleship that will lead to life for their soul.
- He is inviting them to care for their souls, and be careful of losing their souls.

So how do we do that?

- Well, I’d like to share with you three biblical practices today that I think can help us.
- And to make them memorable, I’d like to present them to you today as: Stop, Look, and Listen.
- Can you say that with me: stop, look, and listen.

1. Stop is the biblical word “Shabat,” or “Sabbath.” It means “cease.” Cease working. Stop doing, doing, doing.

The Bible tells us that God himself, after doing all the work of creation in 6 days,

- stopped and rested and refreshed himself on the 7th day.

And in the 10 commandments, God asked his people to do the same thing.

- To take a Sabbath day each week,
- a day to stop doing, cease working, in order to rest our bodies and *refresh our souls*.

One of the primary ways in which we care for our souls, is by cultivating a rhythm of rest in our lives.

- And that includes taking an actual Sabbath day of rest each week,
- but it also includes getting a good night's sleep each day.

Our bodies and our souls were not built to be going, going, going and doing, doing, doing every minute 24/7.

- but you wouldn't know that by looking at most of our 21st century American lives.
- Many of us are constantly overscheduled, preoccupied, -tense, and hurried, and fatigued, and starved for time.
- We end our days exhausted from going all day at work, -or at home raising our kids, or both.
- We've also been running errands, buying groceries, making meals, throwing in the laundry, -and who has time to fold it?
- We go to bed thinking about that and worried about all the other things on our To Do list that didn't get done.

We have every imaginable "time-saving" device at our disposal,

- yet we modern Americans seem to have less free time at our disposal than any generation in history.

And the saddest thing is that most of us are kind of addicted to all of that.

- We are addicted to adrenalin.
- If we aren't busy, busy, busy, we feel guilty that we aren't being productive.

The first and best thing we can do to actually cultivate and care for our soul, the inward dimension of our lives,

- is to stop.
- We have to learn to stop. Shabat! Cease.
- Daily, weekly, monthly, yearly.
- We need to build into our lives a rhythm of rest.

God made us for this, and built all of creation around rhythms of rest.

- Winter is a season of rest for all of nature each year.
- It's built into the way God created the world to be.

We need to practice resting, stopping what we are doing, ceasing.

-And we must begin by confessing that most of us are not good at this: we resist it.

We are convinced that if we “stop doing things” they won’t get done, and then, you know, the world might end, -and it will be our fault.

-One of the great benefits of Sabbath rest, is that it teaches us that the world doesn’t revolve around us.

-It takes the burden of carrying the weight of the world off our shoulders.

-My friends, that in itself, is good for our souls.

The first way to cultivate our souls is simply to stop hurrying every minute.

-But what do we do once we have stopped for a time of rest?

2. Well, the second word is Look.

-And by “look,” I mean, pay attention to your life.

We stop doing all that external stuff for a period of rest,

-and as we rest, we look at our life, our whole life, our soul.

-And we are looking to see what is there to be seen.

-First, pay attention to your body. What’s it telling you?

-Is it exhausted? Stressed and tight, and a headache?

-Or is it energized and feeling good?

-What is your body telling you about the state of your physical health? Pay attention.

-Pay attention to your mind and your emotions.

-What are they telling you?

-Are you rehearsing some conversation with a co-worker in your mind, and your just mad at what she said?

-Or do you notice that you’re actually angry with all kinds of people?

-What are you thinking about when you have a chance to think?

-What are you worried about? What are you thankful for?

-Pay attention to your thought life, and your emotional life.

- And pay attention to your will?
- What kinds of choices have you been making in the past week or two?
- Good choices you're glad about, and satisfied with.
- Or not so good choices about how you spent your time and money and efforts?
- Are some of them choices that you don't really want anyone else to find out about?
- Are there certain aspects of your life that you'd like to keep secret?
- What sites on the internet are you frequenting these days?

You see, cultivating our soul means that we not only Stop,
 -but that we Look at our lives, and pay attention to what's there.
 -We look our lives squarely without denying or avoiding or making excuses.
 -We want to see clearly what is happening to our souls in the daily grind of life.
 -Are we gaining our soul, or losing it slowly but surely?
 -So we stop, and we look.

3. And then we listen.

And by listening, I mean we respond appropriately to what our life is telling us.
 -And we respond appropriately to what God is revealing to us as we stop and look at our souls.

You see, the "upward dimension" is all mingled in with our "inward dimension."
 -They are not separate compartments, even though we are looking at them individually.

But when we stop, and look, and listen, God will actually speak to us about our lives.
 -He will highlight certain areas and nudge us to respond in certain ways to what we see.
 -If it is a sinful, soul-killing habit that He points out, it is not to rub our nose in it and make us feel bad.

- No. He brings conviction so we will confess it, and repent of it, and be forgiven for it, and set free from it.
- But listening means that we respond to what He shows us in just that way.

It means we don't just let the conviction roll off our back, but that we heed what God invites us to do.

- Or if what we discover as we "look" at our souls is that our body is tired and stressed, the appropriate response of listening is to take a full day of rest, and rest.
- Or if what we discover when we look at our soul is that our emotions are all out of whack,
 - and we are just angry all the time, or full of lust, or just plain sad and discouraged,
 - then the appropriate response is to listen to our soul and get some help.
 - Find someone to process those feelings with so that you can find some measure of healing and restoration.

You see, this is what it means to listen to your life, to listen to your soul, to listen for the voice of God,

- which is calling us to wholeness, to fullness, to maturity.

He wants us to grasp how wide and long and deep the love of Christ is, and allow it to save our souls,

- and to restore our souls, and to nourish our souls in His redeeming grace.

We can cooperate with this amazing work of the Spirit in our lives by practicing daily, weekly, monthly and yearly:

- Stop, Look, and Listen.

For what good is it if we gain the whole world and lose our souls?

Let us pray.