

How to Care For Your Soul

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Do you ever get tired of trying to take care of all your “stuff”? There is more to us than our possessions. We have an inner life—a *soul*—which, while invisible to the outside world, is very real and of utmost importance. Your soul is a living thing that needs nurture, care and attention. But what exactly does a soul need?

I’m intrigued by Martha Stewart. She is the undisputed supreme authority on the proper handling and care of . . . well, *stuff*. She once devoted an entire show to the cleaning and care of wicker baskets. Using the right soap, the right brushes, drying them, stacking them, hanging them. Properly. She said it takes her a full day to properly maintain all her baskets. She also promised all her viewers that, if we took good care of our wicker baskets, they would bring us a lot of joy for years to come. As I watched this amazing basket fanatic, I began to wonder. Who, in their right mind, cares that much about their baskets? How can a show that obsesses over the non-essentials in life be so popular?

I guess it’s easy for me to poke fun at Martha Stewart, because I’m *nothing* like her. I don’t give a hoot about my baskets. In fact, the baskets around my house are in a total state of disrepair—they’re dry, dusty, cracked and neglected. If Martha saw them, she would probably have a heart attack. And I couldn’t care less about those dumb baskets.

I guess I’m just not obsessed with trivial things. Besides, I have more *important* things to do. Like washing my car. And vacuuming the inside. And wiping the windows. Inside and out. After which, I’ll spray Armor-All on the dashboard and all the plastic, and I have this little brush that I use to scrub all the crevices. And then there are the door jams and the wheels, and of course, it’s always good to use a Q-tip in the air-vents to get the dust off. I mean, to wash a car properly, it takes several hours, and if you want to change any of the fluids, and maybe steam clean the engine, then it could take the better part of the day!

I just think it’s important to keep your priorities straight, you know? You have to give attention to the things that *matter*.

As Americans we fill our lives with stuff. We love stuff. We want to take good care of our stuff. That’s why Martha Stewart is so popular. For you, it may not be wicker baskets, but it’s probably *something*—your car, your clothes, your bike, your DVD player, your computer or whatever. Or perhaps you are not so focused on your possessions, but rather on taking care of your body or improving your appearance. Either way, you give considerable time and thought to your external life—your physical property. Once you graduate and have the income, you’ll probably start to collect a lot more stuff. You will have furniture and appliances and a yard and maybe a jacuzzi and a second car and a rear-bagger mower and a Dirt-Devil vacuum with all the accessories, to name a few. And all of that stuff takes up room in your life. Unless you have money to keep buying new things, you have to take care

of what you have. Before you know it, you could be spending all your free time just maintaining your stuff and not have any time for the things that really matter.

When your car needs attention, or your baskets need washing, you know what to do. Even if you have to go to a mechanic or consult Martha Stewart, you know where to bring your stuff when it needs attention. But who knows what to do with a soul? Does anyone know?

Chicken soup . . .

Recognizing our need for spiritual nourishment, and noticing our complete inability to deal with it, someone has offered a solution. Barnes & Noble has an entire section of books that can feed chicken soup to every kind of soul there is on earth. There's even *Chicken Soup for the Baseball Fan's Soul*. (Judging from their notorious behavior, I sometimes wonder if baseball fans even have a soul, but if they do, there's a book full of chicken soup waiting for them.) Still, I question whether a collection of sentimental anecdotes will really satisfy anyone's soul. The trouble with chicken soup is it's mostly noodles and water. Very little meat. All these chicken soup books make me want to write a book of my own called *Man Does Not Live by Chicken Soup Alone*.

The Psalms—filet mignon for the soul

If there's one book that everyone should read to understand the soul, it's the book of Psalms. Gritty and honest, the Psalms mirror our complex array of emotions and validate our deepest needs through poetry and songs. They are a great window into the soul, offering many insights for how to care for it.

What intrigues me about the Psalms is the relationship that emerges between David and his own soul. He actually holds conversations with his soul. Look at one example from Psalm 42:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?
Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*

The psalm begins with a poetic description of David's soul longing for God's presence. Then he asks, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" He encourages his soul, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him . . ." He instructs, teaches, and urges it. It's as if David is a pastor to his own soul. He listens to its needs and desires and then points it toward God. David has become skilled in the art of caring for his soul.

How are you relating to your soul? What is that inner relationship like? When was the last time you stopped your busy activity (of caring for cars, clothes, wicker baskets and a thousand other things) and thought about your soul?

Can you feel my pain?

If you're like me, you have not been good to your soul. And you have not given much thought to your relationship to your soul. In fact, you may have ignored it, denied it, even lied to it, starved it, shut it up, medicated it or neglected it. It's strange that we should treat our soul this way. But we have become very skillful at ignoring and neglecting our soul, until the quiet gaps in our busy days when, unexpectedly, we feel the desperate thirst that David wrote about in Psalm 42.

You might be on your way to class or work and find yourself running late—again. As you drive, your mind races from one thing to the next, remembering the paper that's due today and the meeting you're expected to be at tonight. Looking in the rear view mirror, you check your appearance and notice what a striking resemblance you bear to Bozo the Clown. "Great," you groan. The light turns red. You wait. In those few seconds of silence, you begin to feel the emptiness in the air. It's stifling. Instinctively, you flip on the radio and comforting noise fills the hollow space.

Or you might be in a crowded church service. The worship leader asks everyone to stand, turn to a neighbor and say, "I'm so happy 'cause Jesus is mine." Forcing a smile upon your face, you awkwardly mumble the words to a couple of people and quickly sit down. As the embarrassment subsides, you think about the irony of what you just did—how unhappy you actually feel right now and how distant God seems. The people around you seem to be enjoying themselves as they repeat the "happy" phrase, but somehow the whole exercise makes you feel alienated. After the service you go home, rip open a bag of Doritos, turn on the TV and devour the entire contents while you channel surf.

Perhaps you work out regularly and have a healthful diet. You are a disciplined, punctual, responsible person. People admire you. They often remark how peaceful and confident you seem. It's nice to have this image, but sometimes you don't feel the freedom to be human. You're expected to be strong, peaceful and confident all the time, and it's hard to maintain. Lately, you've been feeling a vague sense of fatigue that never seems to go away. Luckily, while channel hopping you discover the new Super-Ginko-Biloba sauce. The infomercial is full of testimonials from people who were lacking energy until they got revitalized by Super-Ginko-Biloba. You order some (and such a great deal!—it came bundled with a 12-ounce sample of Miracle Ab-Annihilator spray). The sauce and spray help a little at first, but after a couple of weeks your motivation seems to drop even lower than before. Your life feels overwhelming. What's going on?

When we feel empty, alienated or overwhelmed, we don't usually listen to what our soul is saying to us. It is panting; parched for a drink of God's love and life—but we've learned to drown our thirst for God with distractions such as television, shopping, music, hobbies, the internet, parties or an incredibly busy schedule.

We are such well-trained little consumers that the instant we feel any kind of need or fear or weakness or emptiness in our lives, our first thought is to run out and buy something to fix it. And if we can't fix it, then we at least want something to numb the pain. Has it ever occurred to you that your soul might be crying out for your attention? *I'm suffering. Help me!*

If a close friend came to you and said, “I’m suffering. Help me!” how would you respond? Would you flip on the radio to drown out her voice? Would you throw her a bottle of Super-Ginko-Biloba sauce? Would you make yourself really busy and hope she would just go away? Of course not. You would never be that cruel to a friend. First, you would listen. And then you would help. The first step toward caring for your soul is to begin listening to its voice.

The sound of silence

By the time I started paying attention to my soul, it had become like the wicker baskets around my house—in a total state of disrepair. Inwardly I felt dry, dusty, cracked and neglected, but I was too busy doing ministry to stop and deal with it. As ironic as it sounds, staying busy with the activities of ministry became my main way of avoiding my soul! The urgency and importance of our Christian mission provided a convenient escape from the ever-increasing turmoil inside. Eventually, it was clear that I needed to stop the incessant pattern of doing and start listening. I took a six month break from all my normal ministry responsibilities and began exploring a deeper prayer life. The sheer absence of activity and distractions was both strange and scary. I was thrust face to face with everything I had been avoiding about myself and God. I squirmed under the discipline of non-doing. It felt weird. But my soul wanted to keep exploring the weird, scary silence. I pressed on.

In [*A Center of Quiet*](#) (IVP®, out of print but available used), David Runcorn explains how powerfully the Holy Spirit works in moments of silence. “I personally have always struggled with silence. When I’m at home or in the car, I instinctively turn on the TV or the radio to fill the empty space. Now, this is very strange, because one would think that with two pre-schoolers tearing up the house all day I would welcome the occasional break from chaos and noise. But silence was a little overwhelming for me. I had let so much ‘life’ go by, and there were so many unresolved issues on my mind, that the moment I found silence, I immediately felt all those thoughts, feelings, anxieties, guilt and God knows what else that had been festering in my soul—all of it rushing into my mind demanding attention. It was as if my soul was a raging zoo, and someone had forgotten to feed the tigers for a long time. Who wants to open *that* cage?”

Silence is powerful. It opens up your soul and lets out all the suppressed, ignored animals—the hungry, thirsty, wild yearnings that don’t seem fit for dignified, evangelical, Bible-believing Christians. Knowing I couldn’t possibly unravel the tangled mess of thoughts, needs and emotions I had accumulated, it took me a long time before I was willing to try what Runcorn suggests—sitting quietly in prayer, listening to them all and bringing them one by one to God.

Dizzying distractions

Have you ever been praying and found yourself in a mental battle, because even though you want to focus your mind only on the will of God, you can’t stop recurring thoughts or concerns from popping into your mind? I had always been taught that such thoughts were distractions and should be ignored or set aside so you can continue your prayers. One of

my greatest difficulties with prayer was that it became a mental war as I tried to “take every thought captive” and turn my attention back to the will of God. But what if those recurring thoughts were not the enemy, but rather the persistent voice of your soul, bringing something to mind that you’ve been ignoring for too long already? David Runcorn says, “What our scattered thoughts express in most of us is a much deeper fragmenting of who we are—our wills, our longings, our identity. There must be a place, carefully and lovingly made, for listening to our distractions and hearing what they are saying to us . . . furthermore, they must, in some way, be important to us or they wouldn’t keep coming to mind.” God loves us completely and entirely—not just the part that is together, but also the fragments and pieces. “We do not come into solitude and silence to escape from our world,” adds Runcorn, “but to bring all the fragments together—giving our whole life to God.”

So there needs to be a place and time to sit in silence to listen to him, to listen to our soul and to let the animals out. If we are so distracted and our lives so fragmented that we cannot be silent before God, that itself is a sign that we have allowed too much stuff to pile up. We need to give ourselves the space and time with God to address all the issues that are accumulating inside us. To avoid these things by staying busy or filling our lives with noise only makes the soul more distressed, and our inner zoo a more dangerous place to visit.

Getting started

There is a form of prayer that helps me stay in touch with my soul. It’s so simple that anyone can do it, but initially it does take some patience and practice.

First, I find a quiet place where I can be alone. Then I begin welcoming Jesus and acknowledging his presence with me. I take time to thank him for the ways he loves me. I may even imagine him sitting next to me or putting his arm around my shoulder—a very comforting image. I have found this approach to be important, because the atmosphere of safety seems to draw my soul to the surface.

Almost immediately I start to notice the thoughts, concerns, feelings and anxieties that I have been carrying around all day (or from the day before) come rushing to the forefront. I acknowledge each of them to Jesus and then I sit quietly and wait. I may wait for five or ten minutes but sometimes I wait longer. God may give me peace about these things as I mention them in prayer. He may bring a Scripture to mind to comfort my soul. But if there is an issue that remains and it continues to bother me, I’ll write about it in my journal. Often, in the process of writing, God shows me something I hadn’t seen before.

Sometimes I will feel troubled, but can’t figure out why. I’ll pray, “Jesus, you can see the deepest parts of my being. What does my soul need?” Again, I will allow some time in silence to receive Jesus’ response. Like David, I may correct, encourage, question or urge my soul, depending on what seems appropriate. I’ve used this simple form of prayer by itself or, more often, in combination with reading Scripture or a devotional book. The key part, of course, is the time I spend in silence.

What to listen for: Clues from the Psalms:

Once you're ready to begin listening to your soul, the Psalms can help you. They give us clues to what we should be listening for. Here are some things your soul may want to talk about:

- Psalm 42:2 reminds us that the soul needs to be refreshed by the presence of God: *"My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?"*
- Psalm 63:5-8 tells us the soul can also be hungry: *"My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me."* I think we often mistake the emptiness we have in our soul for an emptiness in our stomach. When I'm anxious, or upset, or frustrated, I unconsciously start looking for something to eat. It's not a physical hunger but a spiritual hunger that I try to stuff with pizza. When Jesus said, "I am the bread of life come down from heaven," he was teaching his followers that they could satisfy their hungry souls with him.
- Psalm 23:2-3 teaches that the soul needs rest: *"He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake."* How do you rest your soul? What are green pastures and still waters for you? I have started taking a Sabbath on Sundays. After church, I go somewhere quiet and peaceful and sit with God. I may read something for my spiritual growth, or I may journal or just pray. I may go for a run through the canyons or listen to some worship music. Whatever I do, it always has the purpose of turning my attention and focus toward God. Understanding God's love is the most restful, restoring thing you can do for your soul.
- Sometimes the soul is fearful. Psalm 57:1-3 says, *"Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, until the destroying storms pass by. I cry to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me. He will send from heaven and save me, he will put to shame those who trample on me. God will send forth his steadfast love and his faithfulness."*
- Pay attention to times your soul is overwhelmed with worries. Psalm 94:17-19 reminds us, *"If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would soon have died. When I thought, 'My foot is slipping,' your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up. When the cares of my heart are many, your tender words cheer my soul."* God's Word is more than just a tool to be used for outward ministry. It is full of encouragement, reassurance and tender words that your soul longs to hear. Meditating on God's promises is a powerful way to break the tyranny of worries.
- Finally, listen for signals that your soul is distressed or suffering. Psalm 31:9-10 says, *"Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away."*

As you review this list of different things your soul might be experiencing, do any stand out? Which descriptions seem to fit your soul right now?

Millions of people are content to slurp tepid chicken soup for the soul or tend their wicker baskets. Are you willing to do more than that for your soul? When you take care of your soul, you are taking care of yourself. The soup is thin, and the baskets can wait. Listening to your soul may take some adjusting and planning. When you have many responsibilities all pulling you in different directions, it seems irresponsible to waste time with God. But once you make this costly choice, you can truly know God as the Lover of your soul.