

“Receiving the Spirit”  
1 Corinthians 2:12-16; Matthew 11:28-30;  
John 16:12-15

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What’s the purpose of life? What’s the goal of life? Is it as easy as five steps? Can I simply set a goal, make a plan, get to work, and reach the goal? I imagine there are a few things I can do that with. Generally, I can do that with my garden, but even that’s not always true.

When I think about my life in general, the sense of having an overall goal and being able to achieve it begins to get harder. This is partly because the initial step is a hard one. Sometimes I’m not absolutely sure exactly what my goal should be. Should it just be to be happy? There’s an interesting study recently that looked at happy people—people who said they were happy—and found out they had the same stress levels as everyone else. It seems to me that there’s something more to life than just that surface happiness. Sometimes we’re told that it’s simply having the most toys, the most success, all kinds of things. We get a lot of guidance on what we should want and how it will make us happy. But it feels to me like there’s some deeper wisdom we need.

We’re told we live in a material world. Somehow that starts from the physics and chemistry side of things and seems to work into the idea that if I can just get enough money, if I can just be famous enough, if I can just be the right kind of successful, that’s the goal of life. Yet, that doesn’t seem to bring the deep happiness. You can talk to a lot of people that have tons of money and find them struggling as much as anyone else. Where do we find what we’re looking for?

Well, we’re told we simply live in a material world. I was listening to a YouTube video by a guy named Iain McGilchrist, who makes a pretty good argument for the soul. He noted that oftentimes in today’s society, the soul is something we hardly talk about at all. What is the soul? He happens to be a neuropsychiatrist. He talks about a study a couple of research neurologists did where they shut down a part of a person’s brain using some drugs, and the person made different moral judgments than they otherwise would. Their conclusion was if the brain controls morality, the soul is nothing but a superstition. McGilchrist goes on to talk about how this is a mistaken conclusion, but uses the story to suggest the context today.

Oftentimes we who come to a church will have some sense that there’s a soul, that there’s something spiritual about life. Yet, we live in a world, as the story suggests, that tends to think about the soul and the spirit as merely a superstition, something we should leave behind. We can know what we need to know through math and physics, or through economics, or at least by working hard and getting enough money. But there are things that seem to be intangible that we can’t seem to define in a material way. We are celebrating Father’s Day today. A good father’s love for his children is something that’s intangible. It’s not a material thing that we can hold onto.

So in making an argument today for the intangible, particularly the human soul, I would note that we can read a quote like this one from Shakespeare: *I would have a kind soul that would give ye thanks.*

We could put “brain” in there, but “I have a kind brain” doesn’t quite work. “Mind” might be a little closer. Even “consciousness” doesn’t quite get me there. But when we think of somebody having a kind soul, we have a sense of what that might mean even if we can’t quite define it.

The word for “spirit” in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word “*ruach*.” God breathes life into human beings at the very beginning, and throughout there is this “breath” or “wind” image for the spirit. We get to the New Testament and we have “*pneuma*” which is a Greek word for “wind” or “spirit.” There’s also a word for the soul—*psuché*—the root of *psyche*. So really a psychologist should be a soul doctor.

I’m not trying to create a metaphysics of all this because when we are talking about something that is intangible, that is beyond our understanding, I’m not going to try to make it into something we can fully understand. Yet, it feels like we have this sense that we have a spirit, a soul.

The interesting thing about those words is that the word “spirit” is the idea of breath or wind, something that is moving. Soul comes from a word that means “to blow out” or “to make cool” like you would blow on hot food to make it cool. In some ways, these are just two sides of the same coin—the soul and the spirit. Perhaps the spirit is the language of the soul. We could think of it that way. So when we begin to talk about spirituality, we begin to talk about the language of the soul.

But what is the relationship between a soul and a person? So often I think we think about the soul as residing somewhere inside the body, something that is small because we seem to de-soul-ify our world in some ways, including ourselves.

The Irish poet and theologian, John O’Donohue, in one of his books, describes the soul not as something sitting within the body, but something the body sits within. When I read that phrase, I sat back and said, “Wow, I never thought about it that way.” Maybe that’s the most important thing about that statement. I don’t know whether the body is outside the soul or inside the soul, but it is interesting to think of the soul as more expansive than we generally do. How often do we talk about each other and human beings in general as souls? How can we save souls today when we don’t seem to have any?

Just because there’s a physical aspect to who we are doesn’t mean there isn’t something intangible. Our love is intangible, and yet it is present. I’ll go back to Iain McGilchrist again because he gave this wonderful example—at least I think it’s wonderful; you’ll have to see. It’s the idea of a wave in the water. If I went to the seashore and saw the ocean and it was totally flat, I would still be seeing water. But usually when I go to the seashore and I sit there, I watch waves crashing in. Now, are the waves the water? They shape the water. Their energy flows through the water. But they’re not really the water. I can have water without waves. I’m just suggesting

that we see all the time these ways in which intangible things are joined together, so I want to suggest that body and soul are joined together. Sure, you can have a part of the body that doesn't function correctly, and it influences the nature of or the way that the soul gets expressed, but it doesn't mean that we don't have a soul.

We shape our lives. We start out young, sending children to school because we want them to develop physically, mentally, emotionally. Do we leave it there? What about spiritually? How, when we grow spiritually, can we enliven our souls? Can our souls grow? Jesus' invitation to come and follow him and to learn the unforced rhythms of grace, as Eugene Peterson put it, is soul language. Don't we want our souls to live the unforced rhythms of grace? Do we want to have a life that is lived freely and lightly? How do we do that in today's world? I'm not going to do it if I ignore my soul.

Jesus is inviting us to follow him. And then, when he gets to the end, he tells his disciples, "I can't tell you everything yet, but I will send one who will help interpret and guide you further"—the Spirit of Truth is the way Eugene Peterson translates it. Another way to translate it is the Spirit of Reality, God's Spirit.

We often mention the Spirit, but if there is a Spirit of God that is at work among us and in our lives, perhaps paying attention might be important. I think sometimes I have this approach to the Spirit—"please make my life wonderful"—and leave it at that. There's a story of a very devout person. The person was praying over and over again, "I am abjectly poor, and I really need your help, God. If I could just win the lottery!" He prays it over and over again. The story varies, but finally he dies and goes to heaven, and he asks God, "Why didn't you help me?" God looks at him and says, "Why didn't you ever buy a ticket?" The idea is that we want God to do a lot of things for us, but there are things we can do as well. That's what spiritual disciplines are about. How do we make that step, open our hearts, look to see how God might be working in our lives, learn to listen?

What kind of reception do we give the Spirit? I think it's hard to receive the Spirit in today's world, which tells us we don't have a soul; it's just New Ageism or something. It's taking a step back and saying, "Lord, I want to know. I want to listen. I want my soul fed. I want to know the life you give us." If the language of the soul is the spirit, then paying attention, doing that work of Christian spirituality, doing some of the spiritual disciplines may be more valuable and important than I ever thought.

May your souls rise to meet God. Amen.