

## Soul-Health for Ministry Leaders

While reading John Ortberg's book, Soul-Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You, a light came on. I realized something that never occurred to me before.

*I often have tried to do ministry with an unhealthy soul.*

Ortberg credits Dallas Willard with this understanding of the soul: "The soul is that aspect of your whole being that correlates, integrates, and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self. The soul is the life center of human beings."

In other words, the soul is how our lives become aligned with God, his purposes, and his ways. An unhealthy soul means misalignment with the Lord. You can see how that might be a problem for a ministry leader.

How do you know you are unhealthy, that there is an underlying problem? Symptoms. Here are the symptoms of an unhealthy soul that have cropped up in my ministry at various times.

- *Hurry.* Ortberg distinguishes between hurry and busy-ness. Busy-ness has to do with external conditions – lots of things to do. Hurry is a condition of the soul, the inability to be fully present in a given moment. Hurry is a soul striving to get to the next person, activity, or problem in order to prove something to somebody, maybe yourself.
- *The need to be impressive.* This is a soul needing validation from other humans. This is a ministry leader in search of an attaboy. The need is there even if the actual performance is lacking, which leads to spin (articulate dishonesty) and pretending (getting you to think I am something that I really am not).
- *Perfectionism.* Perfectionism is that arrogance I inflict on myself that says a) I am capable of getting everything right and b) I have no right to rest until I have accomplished it. Which, since I am a fallible human being, means I can never really rest. Perfectionism leads to working too much, neglecting important people in my life, being a task-master instead of a leader, and ill temper with myself and others.
- *Depersonalizing.* People are souls to be tended, not robots to be used. How often have I viewed another person as a means to an end instead of the purpose of my ministry? How often have I viewed my wife or a family member or a friend that way? I shudder to think.
- *Misplaced identity.* Who am I really, at the core of my being? If I suddenly lost every temporary title – executive director, preacher, teacher, husband, dad, grandpa, friend – who would I be then? Often in my ministry I have held to the temporary identity as if it was the permanent one. I wonder how many distortions and insecurities that has caused?

All of these symptoms point to an unhealthy soul. They make ministry dry and unenjoyable and frightening and potentially miserable. They also can lead to a ministry leader harming instead of helping others.

I figure that I am pretty normal. If trying to do ministry with an unhealthy soul has been a struggle for me, then it probably has for many of you, too. Maybe you see different symptoms than mine, but they point to the same underlying condition.

Around this time of year I start evaluating. What course corrections are needed for the next calendar year? This year I am thinking about my soul. What needs to happen for this ministry leader to have a healthier life center in the days ahead and thus a healthier and more enjoyable practice of my calling? Here is what I have so far.

*By God's grace, I will ruthlessly eliminate hurry from my life.* There is little I can do about busyness. Much of it is out of my control and necessary to my calling. But I do not have to live in a perpetual state of striving to get to the next thing. I can rest in God's presence. I can be fully present in any moment, with any person, with any activity. *Lord, un-hurry my soul.*

*By God's grace, I will resist the need to be impressive.* Jesus, the sinless Son of God, died a brutal death on a cross for me. He values me that much even though he knows every unflattering thing about me. His pleasure is the only reward I need. I am free to carry out my calling without worrying about impressing others. What can they give me that matters in light of the cross? *Lord, remove glory-seeking from my soul.*

*By God's grace, I will embrace imperfection.* Things do not have to be exactly as I want them to be. It is okay if I miss something or make a mistake. I will rest in Jesus during the day and at the end of the day. He will show me what needs doing. I will tend to that and leave the rest alone. *Lord, remove perfectionism from my soul.*

*By God's grace, I will interact with others as souls Jesus suffered and died for.* The cross was for them, too. He values them as much as he values me. I am placed here to be a soul-tender, not a task-master. It is not right for me to use people to get what I want. *Lord, please remove from my soul the tendency to depersonalize others.*

*By God's grace, I will live by my permanent title: Adopted Child of God.* That is who I am forever, after all the temporary titles have burned. I will carry earthly titles lightly. I will start living now in my forever identity. I will be my real self. *Lord, remove misplaced identities from my soul.*

Brothers and sisters, I encourage you to do a soul audit. Ask yourself: Do I show symptoms of an unhealthy soul? What course corrections do I need to make? If you need a listening ear or a peer's feedback, let me know. I will be glad to sit with you.

*Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.* 3 John 2