

The Dangers of Soulsh Life

by Watchman Nee

Watchman Nee's sermon warns believers about the dangers of living a soulsh life, emphasizing the need for spiritual discernment and reliance on the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Galatians 5:19

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Soulsh Life"

Description

Watchman Nee warns about the dangers of living a soulsh life, which is characterized by reliance on natural strength, self-conceit, and emotional sensations rather than true spiritual life. He emphasizes that many believers fail to recognize the harmfulness of their soulsh experiences, mistaking them for spirituality, and thus remain blind to their need for the Holy Spirit's illumination. Nee outlines the dangers of suppressing the spirit, retreating into the body realm, and allowing the power of darkness to take advantage of their soulsh nature. He calls for believers to seek God's view on their natural life and to allow the Holy Spirit to reveal the corruption of their soul life, urging them to live by the spirit instead. Ultimately, he stresses the importance of yielding the natural life to death in order to experience true spiritual victory.

Transcript

THE MANIFESTATIONS OF SOUL LIFE

THE MANIFESTATIONS OF SOUL life can be separated generally into four divisions: natural strength; self -conceit, hard and unyielding towards God; self-styled wisdom with many opinions and plans; and emotional sensation sought in spiritual experiences. These are due to the fact that the life of the soul is self, which in turn is natural strength, and that the faculties of the soul are will, mind and emotion. Because there are these various faculties in the soul, the experiences of many soulsh Christians are bound to be extremely unlike. Some incline more to the mind while others to emotion or will. Although their lives are therefore greatly dissimilar, all nonetheless are soulsh lives. Those who turn to the mind may be able to discern the carnality in those who fall under emotion, and vice versa. Both, however, belong to the soul. What is absolutely vital for believers to see is that they must have their true condition exposed by God's light so that they themselves may be liberated by the truth instead of their measuring others with new knowledge. Had God's children been willing to use His light for self -enlightenment their spiritual state would not be so low today.

The most prominent indication of being soulsh is a mental search, acceptance and propagation of the truth. For Christians of this type the highest spiritual experience and the profoundest truth serve but to

cultivate their minds. This does not necessarily mean that one's spiritual walk is not in any manner affected in a positive way; but it certainly de

notes that the prime motive is to gratify the mind. While believers who are mastered by the mental faculty do indeed have a great appetite for spiritual matters, yet for the satisfaction of this hunger they depend more upon their thoughts than upon God's revelation. They consume more time and energy in calculating than in praying.

Emotion is what believers mistake most for spirituality. Carnal Christians whose tendency is emotional in character habitually crave sensation in their lives. They desire to sense the presence of God in their hearts or their sensory organs; they yearn to feel a love-fire burning. They want to feel elated, to be uplifted in spiritual life, to be prosperous in work. True, spiritual believers sometimes do have such sensations, yet their progress and joy are not contingent upon these. The soulish are quite different in this respect: with such sensations, they can serve the Lord; without them, they can scarcely move a step.

A very common expression of a soulish walk manifests itself in the will-that power of self-assertion. Through it believers who live in the soul make self the center of every thought, word and action. They want to know for their satisfaction, feel for their enjoyment, labor according to their plan. The hub of their life is self and the ultimate aim is to glorify themselves.

Previously we learned that the term "soul" in the Bible is translated also as "living creature" or "animal." It simply connotes "the animal life." This should help to indicate to us how soul power expresses itself. The most appropriate phrase which can be selected to describe the life and work of soulish believers is "animal activities" or "animal aliveness": much planning, numerous activities, confused thinking, and mixed emotions: the whole being, both within and without, in agitation and turmoil. When emotion is activated the rest of the being naturally follows suit. But if emotion is depressed or sensation has cooled somewhat, the mind will remain excited in its own right. The walk of a carnal Christian is characterized by perpetual movement-if not physical activity, then mental or emotional liveliness. Such a walk is bristling with "animal aliveness"; it is far from communicating the life of the spirit.

We may summarize by saying that the tendency of the fallen soul is to set believers to walking by their natural power, to serve God with their strength and according to their ideas, to covet physical sensation in knowing the Lord or experiencing the Lord's presence, and to understand the Word of God by the power of their minds.

Unless a Christian has received from God a view of his natural self, he unquestionably shall serve God in the energy of his created life. This inflicts great damage upon his spiritual life and results in his bearing little if any true spiritual fruit. Believers must be shown by the Holy Spirit the shamefulness of performing spiritual work with creaturely power just as we consider it disgraceful for an ambitious child to flatter himself, so similarly God regards our "animal activity

in spiritual. service to be a disgrace. May we be rich in the experience of repenting in dust and ashes instead of striving for the first place before men.

THE FOLLY OF BELIEVERS

Countless saints are blind to the harmfulness inherent in soulish experience. They consider it right to resist and reject those obviously sinful deeds of the flesh because these defile the spirit, but at the same time

are they not justified in walking by the energy of the soul which they share in common with all men and animals? What wrong is there for we men to live by our natural power provided we do not sin? As long as the teaching of the Bible concerning, soul life does not touch their hearts they will be unable to see any reason for denying that life. If for instance they should transgress Gods law and offend Him, they definitely know this is wrong; but if these same believers try their best to do good and to inspire their inborn virtue, how, they ask, can there be any objection? In performing God's work they may neither do it zealously nor depend upon His strength, but at least, they

will argue, what we do is God's work! Perhaps many of these endeavors are not appointed by God; nevertheless, those activities are not sinful, claim these believers, but rather most excellent! What offense can that kind of work be? Since God has bestowed gifts and talents in abundance, why can we not work with them? Are we not to engage our talents? If we are not talented we can do nothing; if talented, we should employ them at every opportunity!

Their reasoning continues in another vein: we of course would be wrong to neglect God's Word, but can it now be wrong for us to search out diligently with our mind the meaning of the Scriptures? Can there be sin in reading the Bible? There are many truths of which we presently are ignorant; how unreasonably long we would have to wait to understand them if we did not use our brains! Is not our mind created by God for us to use? Since we are doing it for God and not for sinful ends why can we not use our mind to plan and plot God's work?

They go one step further. Our seeking for the consciousness of God's presence, they will insist, arises from an honest and sincere heart. When we feel dry and low in our life and labor is it not true that God frequently uplifts us by making us so aware of the love of the Lord Jesus as though He had set aglow a fire in our hearts and by giving us such joy and such a sense of His presence that we can almost touch Him? Can anyone deny this as the summit of spirituality? Why, then, judge it wrong if we earnestly seek and pray for the restoration of such feeling after it has been lost and our life has become cold and common?

These musings are just what numerous saints do turn over in their hearts. They do not distinguish the spiritual from the soulical. They have not yet received that personal revelation of the Holy Spirit which shows them the evil of their natural walk. They must be willing to wait upon God for instruction, petitioning the Holy Spirit for revelation as to the sundry evils of their natural good life. This needs to be done in honesty and humility, accompanied by a readiness to for

sake everything which the Holy Spirit may uncover. At the appropriate time He will point out to them the utter corruption of their natural life.

The Holy Spirit will equip them to realize that all their work and walk are centered upon self and not upon the Lord. Their good deeds are done not only by their own efforts but primarily for their own glory as well. They have not sought God's will in their exertions. They are not disposed to obey God nor to undertake every matter according to His guidance and through His strength. They simply do what and as they feel like doing. All their prayers and striving after God's will are purely outward shows; they are utterly false. Though these believers use God-endowed talents, they nevertheless think only of how gifted they are, forgetting entirely the Giver of these gifts. They eagerly admire the Word of the Lord but seek knowledge only to satisfy the aspiration of their mind; they are reluctant to wait upon God for His revelation in due course. Their quest for the presence of God, for the consciousness of His mercy and nearness, is not for God's sake but for their happiness. By so doing they are not loving the Lord; rather, they are loving the

feeling which refreshes them and affords them the glory of the third heaven. Their total life and labor elevate self as the center. They wish to enjoy themselves.

God's children are awakened to the folly of holding fast their soul life only after they have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit as to the abhorrent character of that life. Such enlightenment does not arrive all at once; it proceeds gradually; not once for all but on many occasions. When believers are illumined by the Spirit for the first time they repent beneath the Light and voluntarily deliver their self life to death. But human hearts are exceedingly deceitful. After a while, perhaps but a few days later, self-confidence, self-love and self-pleasure are reinstated. Hence, periodic illumination must continue so that believers may be willing to deny their natural life. What is truly distressing is to find few believers so possessed of the Lord's mind that they are amenable to

yielding voluntarily to Him in these matters. Multiplied defeats and no less shame are always required to render believers willing and ready to forsake their natural propensities. How imperfect is our willingness and how fickle is our condition!

Christians ought to eliminate their folly. They ought to adopt God's view of the absolute impossibility for their natural walk to please Him. They must dare to allow the Holy Spirit to point out to them every corruption of the soul life. They must exercise faith in believing God's estimation of their natural life and must wait patiently for the Holy Spirit to reveal in them what the Bible says of them. Only in this manner will they be led in the way of deliverance.

THE DANGERS OF BEING SOULISH

Believers who are reluctant to, or who fail to, attain what God has ordained are subject to certain hazards. God's intent is for His children to walk by the spirit, not by the soul or body. Failure to live in the spirit incurs loss. Its dangers are at least threefold.

1. The danger of the spirit being suppressed. The perfect and complete order of God's operation is first to move in the human spirit, next to enlighten the mind of the soul, and finally to execute through the body. Such an arrangement is of vital significance.

Having been born again of the Holy Spirit, believers ought now to live by their spirit. Only so shall they be qualified to ascertain the will of God and to cooperate with His Spirit in overcoming every wile of the enemy. The believer's spirit ought to be very much alive to the movement of the Holy Spirit so as not to quench His movement but follow it in order that He may execute His purpose through the human spirit. God's Spirit needs the cooperation of the human spirit to lead believers into triumph in their daily walk and to prepare them for the good works appointed them by God. (We shall touch on this aspect of the spirit subsequently.)

Many of God's children, however, do not perceive the movement of the Holy Spirit. They cannot distinguish between the spiritual and the soulical. They often construe the soulical to be the spiritual and vice versa, consequently drawing much upon the energy of the soul for their walk and work to the detrimental suppression of the spirit. They assume they are walking according to the spirit while in truth

they are walking according to the soul. Such foolishness throttles their spirit from cooperating with God's Spirit and thereby interrupts what He is wishing to do in their lives.

As long as Christians dwell in the soul they move according to the thoughts, imaginations, plans and visions of their

mind. They covet joyful sensations and are mastered by their feelings. When they have sensuous experiences they are

elated, but when bereft of such experiences they can hardly lift a finger. They are therefore powerless to live in the realm of the spirit. Their feelings become their life, and as their

feelings change so do they too. This amounts to nothing more than walking after the sensations of their outward soul and body instead of living out from the center of their being which is the spirit. Their spiritual sensitivity, overpowered by the body and the soul, grows dull. These believers can only

sense matters in the soul or in the body; they have lost the spiritual sense. Their spirit is disabled from cooperating with God and their spiritual growth is arrested. They are no longer capable of acquiring power and guidance in their spirit for warfare and worship. If a person denies to his spirit complete ascendancy over his being or fails to draw upon its power to

live, he shall never mature. Spiritual sense is most delicate. It is not easy to recognize even for those who have learned to know and follow it. How much more difficult will it be to

discern spiritual awareness if it is subject to constant disturbance from rough soulical sensation emanating from the outside! Not only can soulical sensation confuse, it can also suppress, spiritual sense.

2. The danger of retreating into the body realm. Many fleshly works enumerated in Galatians 5 naturally have their

origin in the lusts of the human body, but quite a few others indicate as well the activities of the soul. "Selfishness, dissension, party spirit" distinctly flow from man's self or personality. They are the consequence of the numerous diverse thoughts and opinions held on to among saints. What is important to note here is the fact that these exertions of the soul are listed together with such sins of the body as "immorality, impurity, licentiousness, drunkenness, carousing." This ought to remind us of how closely entwined are the soul and the body. These two in reality are inseparable, because the body we are now in is a "soulical body" (1 Cor. 15.44 literal). Should a believer therefore merely seek to subdue his sinful nature and not his natural life too, he shall find himself after a short period of experiencing victory over sin, once again tumbling into the realm of the body of sin. Though he may not return to those uglier forms of sin, nevertheless he remains bound by sin.

We should understand that the cross is where God handles the "old creation." There is no partial dealing with the old creation at the cross, for the latter deals with it in its totality. Hence we cannot approach the cross and claim only salvation by substitution without also accepting deliverance through identification. Once receiving by faith the Lord as personal Savior, we shall be led by the indwelling Holy Spirit to desire the experience of co-death with Christ, regardless how much or how little we comprehend identification. Although we shall not lose our new life, we shall fail to enjoy the blessing of it, even the joy of salvation, if we persistently resist the inner desire for the new life. The cross never stops short of its outworking. Deeper and deeper will it operate in us until the old creation is completely crucified experientially. Its goal is the total setting aside of everything belonging to Adam.

Now should God's children, upon experiencing victory over sin, neglect to proceed to overcome the natural life by continuing to dwell in the realm of the soul, they shall discover the soul and body gradually being reunited and leading

them back into the sins which once they had forsaken. It can be likened to sailing against the current: lack of advance means sure drift backward. Whatever has been done shall soon be undone if the cross fails to work thoroughly in us. This may explain why many fall back into their old state after having experienced triumph over sin for a while. Should the old creation's life (that of the soul) be allowed to continue, that life will rapidly reunite with the old creation's nature (sin).

3. The danger of the power of darkness taking advantage. The Letter of James, written to believers, distinctly delineates the relation between soul life and satanic work:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual (literally sourish), devilish. (3.13-15)

There is a wisdom which comes from Satan and it is the same as that which can arise at times out of the human soul. The "flesh" is the devil's factory; his operation in the soulical part of the flesh is as active as in the bodily part. These verses explain how bitter jealousy springs from the seeking of sourish wisdom. It is through the activity of the devil in the human soul. Christians are aware that the adversary can entice people to sin, but do they equally realize he can inject thoughts into man's mind? The fall of man was due to the love of knowledge and of wisdom. Satan is employing the same tactic today in order to retain the believer's soul as his operative center.

The scheme of Satan is to preserve for himself as much of our old creation as possible. If he fails to entangle believers in sin, he will next try to induce them to keep their natural life by taking advantage of their ignorance of his wiles or their unwillingness to yield to the Spirit. For if he does not succeed, all the armies of hell shall soon be totally disemployed. The more believers unite with the Lord in spirit

the more the life of the Holy Spirit shall flow into their spirit and the more the cross shall work in them daily. Hence they shall be delivered increasingly from the old creation and shall yield less ground to Satan from which to operate. Let it be known that all the endeavors of Satan, whether by enticement or by attack, are perpetrated in our old creation. He dare not waste his energy on our "new creation," God's Own life. That is the reason he unceasingly attempts to persuade the children of God to retain something of the old creation be it sin or the beautiful natural life-so that he may continue to operate. How he conspires against believers and confuses them into loving their self life, despite the fact they have hated sin.

While we Christians were yet sinners we "once lived in the passions of our flesh (referring to sins which are related particularly to the body), following the desires of body and mind (referring to soul life)" (Eph. 2.3). The preceding verse informs us that both are being wrought upon by the evil spirit. Now our aim in discussing this is to assist God's children to understand that the body is not the only sphere of Satan's pernicious operation, but that the soul too is the preserve of the adversary. We wish to reiterate that believers must be released not only from sin but also from their natural realm. May the Holy Spirit open our eyes to see the gravity of such a step. Were saints able to be liberated step by step from the life of the soul as well as the power of sin, Satan would meet with great defeat on all sides.

Because believers, carnal as they are, do not know how to guard their minds, evil spirits can easily utilize man's natural wisdom towards the realization of their plot. They can smoothly and subtly introduce misunderstanding and prejudice in man's mind so as to raise questions touching God's truth and doubts as to the truthfulness of others. How extensive the obsessed mind has obstructed the working of the Holy Spirit in man is beyond telling. Although one may have a good intention, his will is betrayed by his obsessed mind. Beautiful ideals, too, hinder the Holy Spirit's action

just as does human foolishness. The evil spirits can even impart visions or lofty thoughts to believers, lulling them into thinking that since these are supernatural they must be of God. And so the saint slips into deeper and deeper deception. Before the self life is delivered to death the believers mind is bound to be curious, desiring to search out, to grasp, to possess: all of which furnishes opportunity to the evil spirits.

The emotional part of the soul also can be aroused easily by the adversary. Since many believers crave joyful feelings and the sensations of having the Holy Spirit, of the loveliness of the Lord Jesus, and of the presence of God, evil spirits will supply their senses with many strange experiences. This is that their natural abilities might be stimulated and that the still small voice of the Holy Spirit, traceable only by man's delicate intuitive faculty in his spirit, might be suppressed. God willing, later we shall discuss these problems in detail.

Christians shall incur great loss in spiritual warfare if they have not dealt with their self. Revelation 12.11 enunciates one of the vital conditions in overcoming the devil-namely, God's people must not love their soul life even to the point of death. Unless self-love or self-pity is committed to the cross they shall surely be defeated by the adversary. Soldiers of Christ who love their lives shall forfeit the victory. The adversary shall conquer everyone whose heart is filled with self-consideration.

Any attachment to things reveals weakness to the enemy. The sole possibility of overcoming him is to yield the natural life to death. Satan can operate through undisciplined souls; he also can directly attack those who know nothing of the cross. Our soul life constitutes the adversary's fifth column within us. It gives ground to the enemy. Regardless how much we know the truth and earnestly contend for it, the soul is forever our vulnerable spot. What is painfully disturbing is the fact that to the degree believers become spiritual to that degree does their soulish life become difficult to detect! The lesser the soulish element, the tougher to treat

it. There may be the merest speck of carnality mixed in with the spiritual life, but just this makes it extremely troublesome to distinguish between what is soulish and what is spiritual. Unless Christians are keenly alert in resisting the devil, they shall encounter great defeat through their self life.

That the Christian's soul life could be deceived and could be used by the devil is indeed beyond common expectation. The alarm must therefore be sounded. It is God's desire that we deny everything we inherit from Adam, even our life and nature. Disobedience to God invariably implies danger.

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