

The Experience of Soulish Believers

by Watchman Nee

Soulish believers are characterized by a focus on knowledge, understanding, and self, leading to pride, self-righteousness, and a lack of dependence on God.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:14, Galatians 5:22

Topics: "Spiritual Maturity", "Emotional Stability"

Description

Watchman Nee discusses the characteristics and behaviors of soulish believers, emphasizing their emotional instability, self-centeredness, and reliance on feelings rather than faith. He highlights their tendency to be overly curious, critical, and prideful, often mistaking knowledge for spiritual maturity while lacking true spiritual experience. Nee warns that these believers are easily swayed by their emotions and external circumstances, leading to a lack of genuine connection with God and others. He calls for a deeper understanding of spiritual life that transcends mere intellectual knowledge and emotional experiences, urging believers to seek true unity with God.

Transcript

THE LIFE OF SOULISH BELIEVERS

THE SOUL VARIES inevitably from person to person. It cannot be stereotyped. Each of us has his particular individuality--a uniqueness which will extend on into eternity. It is not destroyed at our regeneration. Otherwise, in the eternity to come life will be most colorless indeed! Now since there is this variation in the souls of all men, it naturally follows that the life of soulish believers will likewise vary from person to person. Consequently, we can speak here, only in general terms and shall merely present the more prominent features, against which God's children may then compare their experiences.

Soulish believers are inordinately curious For example, simply for the sake of knowing what the future holds do they try to satisfy their curiosity by studying thoroughly the prophecies of the Bible.

Carnal Christians tend to show off their differences and superiorities in clothing, speech or deeds. They desire to shock people into a recognition of all their indertakings. Of course such a tendency may have been theirs before conversion; but they find it hard ever afterwards to overcome this natural propensity.

Unlike spiritual Christians, who seek not so much the explanation as the experience of being one with God, these believers look diligently for an understanding in their mind. They like to argue and to reason.

Failure of their life experience to catch up with their ideal is not what worries them;

it is their inability to understand this lack of spiritual experience which troubles them! They conjecture that knowing mentally is possessing experientially. This is a tremendous deception.

Most soulish believers assume an attitude of self-righteousness, though often it is scarcely detectable. They hold tenaciously to their minute opinions. It is doubtless correct to hold fast the basic and essential doctrines of the Bible, but certainly we can afford to grant others latitude on minor points. We may have the conviction that what we believe is absolutely right, yet for us to swallow a camel but also to strain out a gnat is not at all pleasing to the Lord. We ought to lay aside the small differences and pursue the common objective.

At times the mind of soulish Christians is assaulted by the evil spirit; hence their thinking becomes confused, mixed, and sometimes defiled. In their conversations they frequently answer what is not asked: their mind runs wild: they shift their topics of discussion ever so often, proving how scattered are their thoughts. Even when they pray and read the Bible their mind wanders far away. Although these Christians usually act without so much as exercising a single thought about it beforehand, they can tell others how they always act on principle and how carefully they consider every action, even citing some analogous incidents from their lives to corroborate their claims. Oddly enough, they occasionally do take an action after thinking thrice or even ten times. Their actions are truly unpredictable.

Carnal believers are moved easily. On one occasion they may be extremely excited and happy, on another occasion, very despondent and sad. In the happy moment they judge the world too small to contain them, and so they soar on wings to the heavens; but in the moment of sadness they conclude that the world has had enough of them and will be glad to be rid of them. There are times of excitement when their hearts are stirred as though a fire were burning within or a treasure had suddenly been found. Equally are there times of depression when the heart is not so stirred but rather gives way to a feeling of loss, making them most dejected. Their joy and their sorrow alike turn largely upon feeling. Their lives are susceptible to constant changes for they are governed by their emotions.

Over-sensitivity is another trait which generally marks the soulish. Very difficult are they to live with because they interpret every move around them as aimed at them. When neglected they become angry. When they suspect changing attitudes towards them, they are hurt. They easily become intimate with people, for they literally thrive on such affection. They exhibit the sentiment of inseparability. A slight change in such a relationship will give their soul unutterable pains. And thus these people are deceived into thinking they are suffering for the Lord.

God is cognizant of the weakness of the soulish when they make self their center and consider themselves special upon achieving a little progress in the spiritual realm. He accords them special gifts and supernatural experiences which enable them to enjoy times of such overwhelming bliss as well as times of such closeness to the Lord as though actually to have seen and touched Him. But He uses these special graces to humble them and bring them to the God of all grace. Unfortunately believers do not follow God's intent. Rather than glorifying God and drawing closer to Him, they grasp God's grace for their own boasting. They now regard themselves stronger than others; for, they privately imagine, who can be more spiritual than those who have had such encounters? Moreover, soulish believers have numerous sentimental experiences which induce them to deem themselves more spiritual, not realizing these are but evidences of their being carnal. Not by feeling but by faith do the spiritual live.

Often times a carnal Christian is troubled by outside matters. Persons or affairs or things in the world around readily invade his inward man and disturb the peace in his spirit. Place a soulish one in a joyful surrounding and joyful he

will be. Put him in a sorrowful environment and sorrowful will he be. He lacks creative power. Instead, he takes on the complexion peculiar to that with which or whom he may be associated.

Those who are soulish usually thrive on sensation. The Lord affords them the sense of His presence before they attain spirituality. They treat such a sensation as their supreme joy. When granted such a feeling, they picture themselves as making huge strides towards the peak of spiritual maturity. Yet the Lord alternately bestows and withdraws this touch that He might gradually train them to be weaned from sensation and walk by faith. These do not understand the way of the Lord, however, and conclude that their spiritual condition is highest when they can feel the Lord's presence and lowest when they fail to do so.

Carnal believers bear a common stamp-talkativeness. Few should be their words, they know, but they are goaded into endless discussion by their excited emotion. They lack selfcontrol in speech; once their mouth is open, their mind seems to lose all control. Words pour forth like an avalanche. Now the soulish Christian realizes he should not be long-winded, but somehow he is unable to withdraw once the conversation gains momentum. Then thoughts of all kinds swiftly invade the conversation, precipitating a continual shift in topic and an unfailing replenishment in words. And "when words are many, transgression is not lacking" says Proverbs 10.1.9. For the result will be either the loss of control through much speaking, the loss of peace through argument, or even the loss of love through criticism because secretly and hypocritically they will judge others who are loquacious and deem it most unbecoming in them. Fully aware that flippancy does not become the saint, the carnal person still loves to talk frivolously and bankers to speak and to hear coarse jests. Or he may go in for vivacious and gay conversations which he simply cannot afford to miss, no matter what. Although at times he does abhor such impious or unprofitable talk, it is not for long; for when the emotion is stirred once again he automatically returns to his favourite old pastime.

Soulish believers also indulge in "the lust of the eyes." What often governs their attitudes is the particular artistic or aesthetic view momentarily current in the world. They have not yet assumed a death-attitude to human artistic concepts. Instead they pride themselves on possessing the insight of an artist. Now should they not be ardent admirers of art they may swing to the other extreme of being indifferent to beauty altogether. These will clothe themselves in rags as a token of their suffering with the Lord.

The intellectuals among those who live by the soul tend to view themselves as "Bohemians." On a windy morning or a moonlit night, for example, they are apt to be found pouring out their souls in sentimental songs. They frequently bemoan their lives, shedding many tears of self-pity. These individuals love literature and are simply ravished by its beauty. They also enjoy humming a few lyric poems, for this gives them a transcendent feeling. They visit mountains, lakes and streams since these bring them closer to nature. Upon seeing the declining course of this world they begin to entertain thoughts of leading a detached existence. How ascendant, how pure they are! Not like other believers who seem to be so materialistic, so pedestrian, so enmeshed. These Christians deem themselves most spiritual, not recognizing how incredibly soulish they actually are. Such carnality presents the greatest obstacle to their entering a wholly spiritual realm because they are governed so completely by their emotion. Of greatest hazard to them are an unawareness of their dangerous position and an utter self-content.

Carnal believers may be long on so-called spiritual knowledge but usually are short on experience. Hence they condemn others but do not correct themselves. When they bear the teaching of the dividing of soul and spirit their natural minds smoothly assimilate it. But what happens then? They set about discerning and dissecting the soulish thoughts and acts not in their own lives but in those of others. Their

acquisition of knowledge has merely propelled them to judge someone else and not to help themselves. This propensity to criticize is a common practice among the soulish. They have the soulical capacity to receive knowledge but lack the spiritual capacity to be humble. In their association with people they leave one with the impression of being cold and hard. Their dealing with others possesses a certain stiffness about it. Unlike spiritual believers their outward man has not been broken and they are therefore not easy to approach or to accompany.

Christians who thrive on the soul life are very proud. This is because they make self the center. However much they may try to give the glory to God and acknowledge any merit as of God's grace, carnal believers have their mind set upon self. Whether accounting their lives good or bad their thoughts revolve around themselves. They have not yet lost themselves in God. These feel greatly hurt if they are laid aside either in work or in the judgment of others. They cannot bear to be misunderstood or criticized because they unlike their more spiritual brethren-still have not learned to accept gladly God's orderings, whether resulting in uplift or in rejection. Unwilling are they to appear inferior, as being despised. Even after they have received grace to know the actual state of their natural life as most corrupt and even after they may have humbled themselves before God-counting their lives to be the worst in the world, these nevertheless ironically end up regarding themselves more humble than the rest. They boast in their humility! Pride is deeply bred in the bone.

THE WORKS OF SOULISH BELIEVERS

The soulish are second to none in the matter of works. They are most active, zealous and willing. But they do not labor because they have received God's order; they labor instead because they have zeal and capacity so to do. They believe doing God's work is good enough, unaware that only doing the labor of God's appointment is truly commendable. These individuals have neither the heart to trust nor the time to wait. They never sincerely seek the will of God. On the contrary, they labor according to their ideas, with a mind teeming with schemes and plans. Because they diligently work, these Christians fall into the error of looking upon themselves as far more advanced than their leisurely brethren. Who can deny, however, that with God's grace the latter can easily be more spiritual than the former?

The labor of soulish believers chiefly depends upon feeling. They take to work only when they feel up to it; and if these congenial feelings cease while working they will quit automatically. They can witness to people for hours on end without weariness if they experience within their hearts a burning and unspeakably joyful feeling. But if they sustain a coldness or dryness within they will scarcely speak, or not even speak at all, in the face of the greatest need-as, say, before a death-bed situation. With tingling warmth they can run a thousand miles; without it, they will not move a tiny step. They cannot ignore their feelings to the extent of speaking when stomach is empty to a Samaritan woman or talking while eyes are drowsy to a Nicodemus.

Carnal Christians crave works; yet amid many labors they are unable to maintain calm in their spirit. They cannot fulfill God's orders quietly as can the spiritual believers. Much work disturbs them. Outer confusion causes inner unrest. Their hearts are governed by outward matters. Being "distracted with much serving"

(Luke 10.40) is the characteristic of the work of any soulish believer.

Carnal Christians are readily discouraged in their exertions. They lack that quiet confidence which trusts God for His work. Regulated as they are by their internal sensations and external environments, they cannot appreciate the "law of faith." Upon feeling that they have failed, though not necessarily true, they give up. They faint when the surroundings appear dark and uninviting to them. They have not yet entered into the rest of God.

Lacking in farsightedness, believers who trust in the soul easily become discouraged. Only what is immediately ahead can they see. Momentary victory begets them joy, temporary defeat renders them sad. They have not discovered how to see on to the end of a matter through the eyes of faith. They yearn for an immediate success as comfort for their heart; failure to achieve it renders them unable to press on unwearily and to trust God in continued darkness.

The soulish are experts at finding fault, although they are not necessarily stronger themselves. Quick are the soulish to criticize and slow are they to forgive. When they investigate and correct the shortcomings in others they exude a kind of self-sufficient and superior attitude. Their way in sometimes helping people is correct and legal, but their motivation is not always right.

The tendency to be hasty often stamps those who follow their souls. They cannot wait on God. Whatever is done is done hurriedly, precipitously, impetuously. They act from impulse rather than from principle. Even in God's work, these Christians are so propelled by their zeal and passion that they simply cannot stay for God to make clear His will and way.

The mind of the carnal is occupied wholly with their endeavors. They ponder and plan, plot and predict. At times they presage a bright future, hence are beside themselves with joy; at other moments they foreglimpse darkness and immediately become haunted by untold misery. Do they thereby think of their Lord? No, they think more of their labors. To them, working for the Lord is of supreme importance, but often they forget the Lord Who gives work. The Lord's work becomes the center, the Lord of work recedes to the background.

Soulish persons, lacking in spiritual insights, are guided by sudden thoughts which flash through the mind; their words and works are therefore often inappropriate. They speak, in the first place, not because need summons them to do so but solely because they surmise there ought to be

such a need. And then, they may reproach when sympathy is called for or comfort when warning is in order. All these are due to their deficiency in spiritual discernment. They place too much reliance upon their limited and limiting thoughts. And even after their words have proved to be unprofitable, they still refuse to accept the verdict.

Because he possesses oceans of plans and mountains of opinions it is extremely trying to work with a carnal Christian. Whatever he deems to be good must be accepted as good by others. The essential condition for working with him is perfect agreement to his ideas or interpretations. The slightest interpretation is equated as a deep involvement in what he considers to be the faith once delivered to the saints. Any different opinion which is manifested he positively cannot tolerate. Although the soulish believer knows he should not hold on to opinions, he makes sure that whenever an opinion needs to die it is certainly not going to be his! Sectarianism, he will admit, is unscriptural; but it is never his particular sect which must die. Whatever such a believer does not accept he labels as heresy. (Is it any wonder that other

Christians-soulish like himself--respond in kind by denying the authenticity of his faith?) He is deeply attached to his work: He loves his own 'small, socalled inner circle and is thus incapable of laboring together with other children of God. And he insists on denominating God's children according to his own affiliation.

When it comes to preaching, the soulish cannot rely entirely on God. They either repose their confidence in some good illustrative stories and witty words or in their personalities. Perhaps a few notable preachers can even completely rely upon themselves: because I have said it, people are bound to listen! They may depend on God, but they likewise depend on self. Hence all their careful preparations. They expend more time in analyzing, in collecting materials, and in hard thinking than on prayer, on seeking God's mind, and on waiting for the power from above. They memorize their messages and then deliver, them verbatim. Their thoughts occupy

a primary place in such work. With such an approach as this these believers will naturally put more confidence in the message than in the Lord. Instead of trusting the Holy Spirit to reveal man's need and God's supply to their listeners, they depend exclusively upon the words they deliver to move human hearts. What these carnal believers stress and trust are but their own words. Perhaps their speech does convey truth, but without the quickening of the Holy Spirit even truth is of small advantage. There shall be very little spiritual fruit should anyone lean on words rather than on the Holy Spirit. However much these articulations are acclaimed, they only reach people's minds, not their hearts.

Soulish believers relish using high-sounding spectacular words and phrases. At least in this respect they are trying to imitate the genuinely spiritual ones who, having been given so much experience, are able to teach with a distinctiveness of which none of their predecessors may ever have conceived. The carnal consider this highly attractive, hence their delight in employing wonderful imaginations in preaching. Whenever a masterful idea comes upon them-while walking, conversing, eating, or sleepingthey will jot it down for future use. They never question whether such idea is revealed in their spirit by the Holy Spirit or is merely a sudden thought which burst upon their mind.

Some Christians who are indeed soulish find special delight in helping others. Since they have not yet reached maturity, they do not know how to give food at the proper time. This does not mean these do not have knowledge; actually they have too much. Upon discovering any improper element or when told of some difficulty, they immediately assume the role of senior believer, eager to help with what limited insight they have. They pour forth scriptural teachings and experiences of saints in lavish abundance. They are inclined to tell all they know, nay, perhaps more than they know, now reaching out into the realm of supposition. These 11 senior" believers exhibit one after another everything which has been stored in their minds, without at all inquiring

whether those to whom they speak really have such a need or can absorb so much teaching in one session. They are like Hezekiah who opened all his storehouses and showed off al

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