

Soul Power or Spirit Power?

Romans 12:02k

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

If you were going to take some action that would endanger your life and I said to you, "Watch out! Don't do that!" You know what your reaction to me probably would be. You would say, "I didn't see that. Thank you for showing me. You have saved my life." Now there is a startling instance like that in the record of Jesus' life that makes him appear an ungrateful wretch. Look at Matthew 16:21: "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men!'" That's what I meant by ungrateful.

You might say, "That's different, isn't it? Jesus was describing the whole reason why he came to earth. Even though he had existed with the Creator of the universe throughout eternity, he came to earth specifically to manifest in his death the destruction and the re-creation of us and the whole world that had taken place in God in timeless eternity. That's why he came to earth. He was explaining that he would in fact destroy all those forces that operate in us to prevent us being like him, and Peter didn't know that."

No; but it is interesting, it doesn't matter that Peter didn't know it. If Peter had got his way with Jesus, he would actually have brought about the same result as Satan would have loved to have brought about. Satan wanted to prevent God remaking you and me in his Son. If Satan could have prevented Jesus being crucified and destroyed and raised up miraculously so that you and I could all be raised up with him, he would have done it. Yet, here is Peter, who is as far as we can see, acting pretty flawlessly and faultlessly, trying to bring about the same result as Satan.

In fact, so much so that Jesus calls him Satan. Jesus says, "Listen, that is the kind of advice that I get from Satan. Get behind me. I don't need that." It is startling, loved ones. Here is a man who appeared to be doing a good thing--standing up for this good man Jesus against the evil forces that would destroy him. He was obviously being kind to his leader, trying to preserve his life. Outwardly he was doing things that were good. Inwardly, as far as we can tell, his heart was filled with a love and concern and friendship for Jesus. So inwardly he was good. Yet the ridiculous thing is he ended up giving advice and direction to his Master that would have very effectively frustrated the whole plan of the Maker of the universe.

Now that is soul power. During the past few weeks we have been talking about the kind of life that God wants you and me to live. We have talked about it in the light of those three words at the end of Romans 12:2, where it says you may prove what is God's will in your life -- you may test it out by experience. You may find out what is good. We said that is the first thing God wants us to do. He wants us to be and to do good things outwardly, to speak good words and do good actions. God has planned everything for us and insured that we will have all we need in this life, so he says to us, "You don't need to steal; you don't need to be dishonest; you don't need to be covetous to get what you want. I will supply it for you. You don't need to grab at thrills or excitement through adultery or fornication. I will give you all that you need, so be outwardly good." The first thing we said was God's will for each of us is that we would be outwardly good--that we would do actions that

would conform to his will, that we would speak words that would conform to his will.

We went another step and said that you could do that and still have a heart that was utterly selfish and utterly rebellious and utterly independent of God. So we came to that second word in Romans 12:2--God wants you to be pleasing to him. Not just to do things that are outwardly right, but to be pleasing inside. In other words, God knows we don't really trust him if we feel resentment and envy against other people. The reason you have envy and resentment and jealousy toward other people is because you are not really at ease with the place God has put you in this life. You are not really at peace deep down with the kind of person he has made you. You are not really at rest with his plans for you, and so you want to grab some status for yourself. That is when you feel envy and jealousy.

Now God points out that you do not really trust him for your reputation and your place in this world if you still feel the wriggings and writhings of anger, jealousy, pride or envy inside. We shared that God wanted us to be clean and pure in our hearts. He wants us to be at rest deep down with him in our faith. But there is something else after outward conformity to God's will, after inward conformity in our motives and attitudes to his will. There is something else that showed itself in Peter that can still frustrate God's will for you and frustrate his working through you.

That is this business of soul-power--the misuse of our soul's ability to think and to feel. It is the misuse of those powers. So Peter almost managed to prevent the world being saved through Jesus' death. He almost brought about the situation where the whole world would have gone to hell if Jesus had listened to his advice, despite the fact that Peter was outwardly conformed to God's will, and inwardly in his heart, he had a real attitude of love for Jesus and a desire to save him--and yet he ended up giving advice that would have frustrated God's whole will.

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Now loved ones, what is this soul-power? Do you see why Peter said what he did? He used the folk-wisdom of his mind -- worldly wisdom. He said, "Wait a minute, this is dumb. Jesus is the best man who has ever lived in the whole world and he is going to be killed. That can't be right." Peter used the normal wisdom of his mind--folk wisdom, worldly wisdom, common sense. Then he combined it with the ordinary human love that fills our souls. Our "soul" in the Bible is "psuche", the psychological part of us. It is our mind and emotions and will. Peter combined the worldly wisdom of his mind with the human love of his emotions. "I can't let this dear man whom I love be killed." He combined those two into a poisonous combination that would have prevented, if it could, Jesus dying. That would, if it could, have kept Jesus alive so that God's Spirit would not have been able to resurrect him from the dead and re-create the whole human race with him. That is what soul power is. It is the misuse of our minds and emotions. We are supposed to use them, but we are supposed to use them on the basis that God's Spirit alone can bring about things that he wants. Soul-power is misusing our minds and emotions to try to bring about the thing by our own power.

Soul-power was actually the reason for the fall of mankind out of God's fellowship. Look at Genesis 3:5: "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." You will be like God, but by your own ability, so you will get some of the glory for yourself. You will become like God. If your eyes are opened and you know the difference between good and evil, you will become like God, but by your own ability and power so that you will get some of the glory, even though you are being like God. That is what independence of God really is. It is trying to fulfill his will in your life, but by your own soulish ability and energy. It is a kind of inner confidence that you can do it without his help or aid. You might say, "Isn't it kind of a fine line between the right use of the mind and emotions and the wrong use?" Yes, it is.

The soul-powers of mind and emotions are themselves neutral, and they attain moral evil or moral good only by the will--the good or bad will that uses them. So most of us fall into the misuse of our soulish powers by deception, that is, by venal sins or unconscious sin. We don't know we are doing it. As opposed to mortal sin -- conscious sin. It is not so much a rebellion but rather a deception. We hardly know we are doing it. Yet, loved ones, do you see, as in Peter's case that doesn't affect the catastrophic, cataclysmic results that the misuse of our soul-power can bring about. Probably the heart of the mystery of soul-power is lack of faith. It is not using our minds and emotions on the basis of the ever-present power of God's Holy Spirit to bring about his will in different situations. It is the misuse of the mind and emotions on the basis that the Holy Spirit isn't anywhere around, and if we don't do something nobody is going to do anything. That is what drives us into the misuse of our soul-power to living our life by soul-power and not by spirit-power.

You will see that with Peter in another instance in Gethsemane. Look at John 18:10. The soldiers were closing in on Jesus, and then John says, "Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's slave and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?'" It is Peter at the same game; yet, it was out of the goodness of his heart. He was anxious to save Jesus. His heart was clean and his outward actions conformed to what he felt in his heart, and yet he still ended up about to do something that would have prevented the salvation of the whole universe. Do you see why he did it? They were in Gethsemane and suddenly he saw these soldiers coming towards Jesus. At that moment all his faith flew and disappeared. Everything that Jesus had talked about and all the feeling that God was in control disappeared. He suddenly realized, "Wait a minute! The Creator of the universe didn't count on this. This is something he didn't expect. This is an occurrence that he didn't bargain for." He pulls out his sword to try to rectify the situation. The heart of the misuse of our soul-powers, the heart of soulishness, is lack of faith.

How does it show itself in our situation? I could give you a thousand instances, but here is one. A friend of yours at work or a colleague, or a close friend, begins to practice gross immorality. They profess to be children of God--Christians--but they begin to practice adultery or fornication or something that is plainly a transgression of God's will. You, on the next encounter with them, talk about it frankly, because you do love them. Then you begin to pray for them daily that God's Spirit would convict them of their sin and would restore them to his own love and faith. Meanwhile, in all your subsequent encounters with them, you treat them as if it had never happened. You pray for them daily but you treat them as if they were the person they were before this occurred. You love them with a whole heart. That is the way God wants, because only his Spirit can convict of sin anyway.

How do we do it soulishly? The friend falls into gross immorality. At the first opportunity we talk about it with them, and then we begin to pray that God's Spirit will convict them of this sin and will restore them to his favor. But, on every subsequent encounter we are constantly mindful of what they have done and of the fact that they are living in sin, and we express it to them in a thousand little ways. Sometimes by the tone of our voice, sometimes by a little coldness that no one could actually describe in words, sometimes by the over-eager way we take opportunity in conversation to bring the point home again. Do you know what happens? The person feels more and more that you don't really love them, that you aren't really their friend, and the same death occurs that would have occurred if Peter had had his way with Jesus. Isn't that right? The relationship just disappears gently, and we retain our self-righteous feeling that we have stood up for truth. That is soulish power; that is trying to do with the subtle powers and pressures of our personality what God's

Spirit alone can do. It destroys marriages, wreaks havoc with roommates and destroys families.

What is the problem with husbands and wives? We won't leave each other alone. What is the problem with roommates? We won't take our hands off each other. It is not just that we won't leave each other alone, but we won't leave each other in God's hands. By little tones of voice, by little castings up of the eye at the right moment, by subtle (we call them subtle, but a blind dog would see them) little comments we keep wriggling the little knife that we think we can cut out the bad bit. At times we are not sure whether we are cutting out the bad bit or just wriggling the knife for the fun of it, but we keep pushing, hinting, edging, and pressing. We will not take our hands off; we will not leave each other in God's hands and pray daily for each other and love each other with an open, uncondemning heart.

Loved ones, soulish power brings the same destruction in our home, offices and families as it would have brought about for the whole universe if Peter had had his way. There are a thousand other examples that God's Spirit will bring home to your heart. Soulsh power, that misuse of your mind and emotions on the basis of the fact that God's Spirit cannot do this, will frustrate God's will in your life. That is part of what the third word means-- "...that you may prove what is good, what is pleasing and what is perfect." We have to be freed from lives that are outwardly disobedient, from hearts that are unclean, and from this misuse of our soulsh powers whereby we try to use our own personality to bring about what God alone can bring about.

How do you get free from it? It is a daily thing that God will have to do gradually in you. First, don't get more preoccupied with the problem than you are with God's love and ability. That is when the soulsh power snake out. You keep looking at the situation, finances, family, job situation, personal relationship situations until your mind is filled with the horror of the situation and your soul powers rise to take the sword and cut off the ear of the servant. Do anything to get the situation fixed. Don't keep looking at the situation until you are so utterly bereft and desperate that all your powers of soul rush out to do something about it. Look at God. Spend time always looking at God. Spend time in your prayer time each day thinking of his power and ability and his love for you, thinking that he wants you to be delivered from this far more than you do. Don't get more preoccupied with the situation than you are with God's love and ability to do something about it.

Secondly, ask the dear Holy Spirit, "Holy Spirit, where am I using my soulsh powers to try to influence this person, to try to bring about this situation in my job or this possibility of my future? Where am I actually using my soulsh powers instead of resting here on this dear cross with Jesus and being confident that you have this under control and using my mind and emotions in the light of that?" Because it is using your mind and emotions. In the first instance, you use your mind to talk to the person about the situation. You use your mind and your spirit to pray for them, you use your emotions to show them love; so it is not a passivity in mind and emotions, but it is using your mind and emotions appropriately and not substituting them for God's Spirit.

If we lived that way, there wouldn't be any divorces. Divorces come partly when we are determined to fix each other. There wouldn't be divorces. There probably wouldn't be these great crises in the office or big personality confrontations if we would begin to trust the Lord. Loved ones, would you ask him to show you? There is a fragrance that comes into your own relationship with others, a fragrance comes into your own attitude to God when you stop trying to do it by your own soulsh powers and begin to trust his Spirit to do what he alone can do and to show you what you can do.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you for Jesus' life and for that incident where Peter did apparently what is good and apparently what was right in his heart. Yet it was not your will. And because it was not your will, it was not by your Spirit and your power.

So Lord, we would ask you to give us light and wisdom ourselves to see where we are spoiling it all. Show us where we are taking too much into our hands and trying to bring things about by our own soulish misuse of our mind and emotions. Lord, show us where to trust you and where to trust our own minds and emotions. Show us where only you can act and where we can act together with you.

Father, we ask for wisdom about this so that we will walk this coming week in faith and in peace and in rest. Lord, allow us to see your kingdom extended in the lives of our loved ones, friends and colleagues without those hideous confrontations and conflicts which we produce ourselves. Lord, we thank you that there is a better way. Lord, we thank you that you have destroyed these perverse powers of our emotions and minds and you recreated them in yourself through your resurrection. We can receive them day by day, new and fresh by your hand. We thank you for that.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of His Holy Spirit be with us throughout this coming week.