

What a SOUL NEEDS

We know a lot about how to care for our bodies. Our diet and exercise habits are well-informed. But what about our souls? Most problems are soul problems. Your soul is your deepest you—and God loves your deepest you. How do we take care of our souls? We need to nourish our inner lives and become people whose hearts, minds, wills and bodies are integrated and whole. This summer, we look to the middle chapters of Matthew to discover what the soul needs to find health and peace—resting in the hands of a God who loves us.

COMMUNITY • Matthew 11:2-11 • Tim McConnell • July 9, 2017

Don't go it alone. Life requires the buddy system. There are lots of things people tell you never do to alone. Never go hiking alone. You might come upon a bear or a mountain lion, and you'll want a buddy along – a buddy who runs just a little slower than you do. Never go climbing alone. Never go skiing alone. Swimming, fishing, kayaking, hunting...pretty much whatever you want to do. I've been told never to buy jeans alone. Life requires the buddy system. Actually, your soul needs company. We were built to be better together. Usually read at weddings, Ecclesiastes 4 says "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up." Or this verse from 1 Peter, "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart." (1 Peter 1:22) Now that you are a follower of Jesus, learn how to be a friend. Love one another deeply. The soul needs company.

We're going along now in the middle of Matthew looking at various moments in the ministry of Jesus and asking this question, "What does a soul need? What is the proper care and feeding of the human soul?" A soul needs a Savior, a soul needs value, a soul needs purpose—and today, a soul needs company. That stands to reason, because we were made in the image of God. God, the one true and holy God, God is one but God is also three. God is not a cold and lonely monad, God is revealed to be a Trinity—beyond human reason, a Threeness that is also a Oneness. Trinitas. Tri-Unity. The Trinity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We can't fully understand it, but we know it teaches us that God, even God, is not alone. How could our soul be satisfied alone if our soul was made in the image of God, and even God is not alone? Solitude can be healthy but alone is no good! Sometimes solitude is just what we need: to withdraw and rest, to reflect and catch up with ourselves and with God. But a chosen time of solitude and deep loneliness are two different things. Solitude can be healthy but alone is no good. The soul needs company.

In his book, *Soul Custody: Choosing to Care for the One and Only You*, Stephen Smith talks about four levels of friendship like the four chambers of the heart. Chamber one is trivial connections—where do you live? What do you do? Chamber two reveals some common interests. In chamber three we start to share our story, the good and a little of the bad. But cham-

ber four is what we need; not for all our relationships, but at least for a few. Chamber four where nothing is held back. Here I am. Here is my life in all its beauty and ugliness. We long not only to be loved but to be known. Fully loved and fully known—that's chamber four friendship. "In a soul friendship, we move out of our dungeons and into the light of not only each other's presence but also the very presence of Christ—the true light...we die to our false self and learn the joy and sheer grace of finally being accepted as we truly are. Here is unparalleled safety and grace that no other entity in life offers us but soul friends." (p. 188)

Now a word of warning here. Be careful who you bring in to that fourth chamber. Be careful who you choose to trust. Your friends will have an enormous impact on who you grow to be. You may have heard, "Show me your five closest friends and I'll show you your future." It's a biblical idea. Proverbs 13:20 (among many) says, "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm." Don't underestimate the power of your friendships to pull you away from the Lord. If you are walking in a company of friends, giving them some bit of your heart and devotion, and at every turn they despise godly things and elevate ungodly things, what do you expect? You're standing the rain. You will get wet. We should all have friends who need our sway, we should all have non-Christian friends or friends who look up to us who we are attempting to shape and influence. But pay attention and know what type of relationship it is. Am I trying to be like this person, or influence and disciple this person? Soul friendships offer the greatest possibility of transformation; they should be people who want to strive after Jesus just as much as you do.

Many of us are blessed to find that in marriage, at least for a season of our lives, but we need to learn to find it in friendships too. Before marriage we are single; after a spouse passes away or divorce we are single; some of us are called to singleness for a lifetime as a full life and full of good company and blessings. What I'm saying is don't assume marriage is the only answer to this need for a soul companion. If you are married, seek it first in your spouse and secondarily in others. But if you are single, don't put off seeking companionship for your soul until marriage. The soul needs company.

Jesus was never married, but He had soul companions. Peter, James, and John in particular seemed to get closer to Jesus than any others. But today we look

at Jesus' relationship with His distant cousin, John the Baptist, who I think we can say was a soul companion to Jesus—and probably His closest one. They were so close, so intimately tied, that Jesus says something about this man He says about no one else, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matthew 11:11) Some see in our passage a moment of doubt in John. He's sitting in prison. If you don't know, let me tell you it does not end well for John. He is eventually beheaded by Herod. Maybe John is not sure of what's going on with Jesus. If so, I'd forgive him for sure. But I actually take the more dominant side in the history of interpretation, that John was doing what John always did—pointing others to Jesus. Even in prison, from far away, he points out, "If you want to find the Savior, go look at what Jesus is doing." Jesus, in return reveals just how big a man John is in His own life. These are soul companions—the soul needs company.

So let me elevate five things we see in the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist as we look at soul company, and try to find this in our own lives. (1) They had **affinity**. They had stuff in common. I recently heard Bob Goff say, if you're trying to build a deeper relationship with your wife, or your children, or friends, just find one more thing in common. John and Jesus had stuff in common. They were so alike there was a legend among church fathers that John and Jesus were supernaturally twins! That's why Herod asked if John had come back from the dead when Jesus showed up in town. I don't think there's anything to that, only that they had affinity.

(2) Jesus and John the Baptist had **mutual admiration**. This is tricky, because it's Jesus we're talking about here! John's job was to point to Jesus. Jesus' job was to point to...Jesus! – and in pointing to Himself, direct us all into a restored relationship with God. But even so, in demonstrating for us the importance of soul companionship Jesus and John express mutual admiration. John said to the crowd at the Jordan when Jesus came to be baptized, "After me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry," (Matthew 3:11) one to whom I should be a slave. When Jesus knelt for baptism, John said, what are you doing? "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14) John tells his disciples as they are sitting there in prison kibitzing about the situation and the dark future, he says, why don't you get up and go see about Jesus? Then come back to tell me what you see. Then

come back and look again at this place, this situation we are in, in light of that. John admired Jesus above all. His whole ministry was to point the way to Jesus. "He must increase, I must decrease," he said (John 3:30). This is the One, this is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Look to Him, not to me. And for it, Jesus returns, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not been anyone greater than John the Baptist." (Matthew 11:11). They had mutual admiration.

(3) They had **common purpose**. Disclosing the reality of the Kingdom of God. John was so well aligned in his heart and spirit and mind with the purposes of Jesus that when Jesus' ministry began, it almost looked like a continuation of something John the Baptist had started! But it was the Lord's ministry all along. There is nothing like common purpose to build soul companionship. You can't just stare at each other over coffee and say, "Let's be friends." Friendship is born of adversity and victory in the battles of life. (4) They shared **loyalty**. Never did one turn on the other, not for a moment. You can't have someone in the fourth chamber of your heart and wonder if they might just pull a dagger and stab you in the back one day. Soul companions must have trust built on time-tested loyalty. And (5) they kept **connection**. Even when they were apart—that's one of the things I love about this relationship—even when they were far apart, you see them keeping tabs on one another. My closest friend lives 1400 miles from here. That's over twenty hours' drive. But in another way he is nearer to me than anyone in this room other than my wife Abigail—we're close because he knows my heart, and I know his. Do we keep connection with those we treasure as friends, as soul companions, even when we are far away? Do you think Jesus ever lost track of where John was? Do you think John ever spent a day without a thought about where Jesus was and what Jesus was doing? You don't have to be in each other's hip pocket to be companions at the soul level.

So there's five things, five things I see in the companionship of Jesus and John the Baptist. Affinity, Admiration, Common Purpose, Loyalty, and Connection. Maybe you see more. I believe the soul needs company. Solitude can be healthy but alone, loneliness, is deadly. If you want to know what your soul needs, it needs a connection like this. Meaningful spiritual transformation is born of soul companions. We need more than information to live the Christian life. We need more than inspiration to walk the ways of Jesus. Information and inspiration just don't add up to transformation. Transformation comes life to

life, in soul companionship, when we walk together. Dallas Willard writes, "Spiritual formation, good or bad, is always profoundly social. You cannot keep it to yourself. Anyone who thinks of it as a merely private matter has misunderstood it." (*Renovation of the Heart*, p182).

I have a friend whose sister fell into a difficult time in her marriage. Her sister disclosed to her, very privately, a terrible indiscretion her husband had committed. My friend got off the phone and immediately texted her prayer group. Then she felt guilty. "Oh no! Have I betrayed my sister's privacy?" She got back on the phone with her sister and explained what she had done. "It just happened without thinking. With these women, it's like they're a part of me. I immediately needed them praying and didn't even think it might hurt you. I'm so sorry." The sister was not mad. But she did fall silent on the phone for a heavy moment, then said, "You have people who pray for you in times like this? How did you get that?" I hope you have soul companions. People who truly know you. People who can truly pray for the real, deep down, private, fourth chamber, soul-level pains and interests and needs in your life. People you can say are loyal to you and to Jesus—who want God's best in your life. People you trust to speak Scripture into your life, even in corrective ways. "Do you have people like that?" It's possible. It's part of the gift God is trying to give you in the community of faith.

Remember, most problems are soul problems. But soul health is possible, because God loves your deepest you. Your deepest you needs a deepest friend, a deepest companion. The soul needs company. Value your friendships. Pray for a soul companion or two. The best way to develop one is to be one—try to be that friend for someone else and watch what happens. But do remember, never forget, when all your friendships fail, when there are none to stand with you in this world at all, when you fail those around you and they fail you, when you are utterly bereft of anyone to trust, and you find yourself all alone, all alone, there is a friend who stands closer than a brother. His name is Jesus. He is always there, always with you, always keeping track of you, always after your best interest, always, always, giving Himself away to be your soul companion. Yes your soul needs company. If ever you can't find it, first and foremost find it in Jesus.

STUDY GUIDE

"What a Soul Needs: Company"

Matthew 11:2-11

Start It

- "If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go alone." So goes the African proverb. We are moving so fast, not only are we leaving our souls in the dust but we are leaving our friendships with them. Each generation reports feeling more isolated than the last. In 2006 a survey reported that one out of four Americans say they have no one with whom they can discuss personal troubles. Take a minute to remember your strongest friendship in its strongest season. The soul needs companionship.

Study It

- John the Baptist didn't follow Jesus in his ministry but kept tabs on it from afar. Read Matthew 11:2-3. Why was John in prison? Why do you think he sent his disciples to speak with Jesus? Was John doubting what he knew of Jesus' identity back in Matthew 3? What produces doubt in your life of faith?
- Read Matthew 11:4-6. Why doesn't Jesus answer their question directly? How does Jesus answer the question? What reassures your faith in times of doubt?
- Read Matthew 11:7-11. What is a prophet? Is John the Baptist a prophet? What does Jesus mean that no one born of a woman is greater? If the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than the greatest in this world, what does that tell us about Heaven?
- Do you think John the Baptist was an encouragement to Jesus? Do you think Jesus was an encouragement to John the Baptist? What does Jesus teach us about friendship or companionship through his relationship with John the Baptist?

Pray It

Almighty God, at times our souls crave quiet solitude to reflect and sit in Your presence, but loneliness is never welcome. We pray with thanksgiving for the companions You have sent into our lives, and we pray for strength to be good and faithful companions to those around us. In Your name and to Your glory, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Live It

Write a note to the best friend and companion in your life and let them know how important they are to you.