

The Cure for Soul Sickness

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] You can generally tell that your lungs are healthy if you're able to breathe well and there's no pain or difficulty or shortness of breath.

! You can generally tell if your heart is functioning properly and decently healthy if you've got low blood pressure, low cholesterol, normal cholesterol range, no shortness of breath, no pain.

You can generally tell if your joints are healthy, if you have good mobility, if there's no pain, if you can get through your day without noticing them.

You can generally tell that these various parts of your body are healthy by the way they function. You don't have to be an expert. You don't have to be a doctor. But what about our souls? How do you gauge whether or not your soul is healthy in a good place?

If your soul were to be sick, how would you know? What would the symptoms be? You know, this morning we're looking at this incredible passage in Philippians chapter 2.

[1 : 05] Of course, it's Palm Sunday. We're also going to, a little bit later, consider this great story of the triumphal entry that we read on the steps of the church a moment ago. But we're focusing right now primarily on the New Testament reading for this morning, Philippians chapter 2.

This is the very heart of Paul's letter to the Philippians. This passage is something that by itself we could legitimately spend weeks and weeks and weeks just unpacking all of the depth and meaning of this passage.

We're simply this morning going to be able to carve off a piece of it with the time that we have. But we're going to consider this question of soul sickness. What are the symptoms of soul sickness?

What's the underlying cause that we need to be aware of that Paul mentions here? And then what's the cure? So let's pray and then we will open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for this morning, for the freedom to gather here together.

And we thank you for what we are remembering and celebrating. Lord, the events of this triumphal entry, the beginning of the week, of your passion that ultimately leads us to the cross, to the tomb, and then out of the tomb into the promise of new life for us and for the world.

[2 : 22] Lord, we thank you for this journey, Lord, that we get to be on with you. And we pray that as we open your word, you would guide us and direct us in our understanding. And that through your Holy Spirit, we would encounter the living word, Jesus Christ.

For it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, let's consider some of the symptoms that might lead us to wonder whether or not our souls are healthy or sick.

Paul is in Rome. He's sitting under house arrest. He's writing this letter to a church located in a place called Philippi. This is a church that Paul helped to start roughly 10 years earlier.

They've been around about a decade. And Paul's heard some things are going on there and they're concerning to him. And so he writes this letter to address some of the issues. If you peruse the letter and look at the various things Paul addresses, you can discern some of the things that are going on in this community.

There's envy and rivalry. You see that in chapter 1, verse 15. Envy and rivalry. Some of the people there have become overly self-focused.

[3 : 32] Chapter 2, verse 4. They're only looking out to their own interests. They don't care about the needs of the people around them. They just want to make sure their own needs are met. He hears about some people who are chronically grumbling and complaining.

Chapter 2, verse 14. Just grumbling and complaining. Nothing's ever good enough. There's also quarreling and division happening. There are these two women, Euodia and Syntyche.

And by the way Paul addresses and refers to these women, it's very clear that these are prominent, influential leaders in the church. And these women are fighting with one another.

And I don't have to tell you, anytime you have fighting in the church, it's a big deal. But anytime you have church leaders who are fighting, that's not good. That's not a good sign.

So these are things that Paul hears. And of course, as we hear them, we say, you know, well, that's not the way things are supposed to be. Especially in the church. You would expect the church would be different.

[4 : 36] Paul longs to see unity and harmony in this church. He says, if there's any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

That's what Paul desires to see in this church he loves. And I would say that's what we all want. Think about your family. Think about your friendship, your friend group.

Think about the neighborhood that you live in. Think about the city. Think about the world. This is what we all want. We want to be of the same mind. We want to live in peace and harmony.

But instead, we have polarization. We have social fragmentation and decay. We have poverty.

We have injustice. We have war. That's the reality of the world that we live in. And we have plenty of quarreling and division. And unfortunately, it's not just out there.

[5 : 43] It's in here. That's a reality in the church. It shouldn't be that way, but it is. And you will find that in every church you go to.

You will never find a church where these issues are not present. And the reason is that there is something wrong with our souls as human beings.

There is a soul sickness that gives rise to these symptoms. When you see things like envy and grumbling and complaining and division, those are indications like joint pain, like shortness of breath, that something is not okay with our souls.

And Paul actually mentions it. All of these issues result from one core issue that Paul names in chapter 2, verse 3. When he says the phrase selfish ambition and conceit.

Or we might boil that down to one word. Paul is saying the core issue here, the thing that I'm most concerned about in this church, is pride. It's pride. Pride is at the root of everything that's wrong in our lives.

[6 : 54] Pride is at the root of everything that is wrong in the world. Pride is at the root of everything that is wrong in our relationship with God, with one another. If you go all the way down to the core, you will find pride.

Now, a lot of people mistakenly think that pride is the same thing as ambition. Or that pride is the same thing as arrogance.

Right? They think of pride as somebody who's boasting and bragging about all of their accomplishments. And so they think, well, I don't go around boasting and bragging, so pride must not be an issue for me.

Not so fast. With all due respect, take another look at yourself. There are many different ways that pride manifests itself.

One way that pride manifests itself is in the form of arrogance and boasting and bragging. Yes, that is a form of pride. But that's merely one form of pride. And there are many ways that pride can manifest more subtly in ways that don't immediately look like pride to us or to other onlookers.

[8 : 0 0] So, for instance, pride can manifest as a quiet judgmentalism. You don't ever brag. You don't ever extol your own virtues.

You don't tell people stories about your accomplishments. You're quiet. By all appearances, you seem like a very humble person. But you tend to quietly look down on other people.

You quietly judge people's sense of taste. You quietly judge people's morals. You look at the way they parent their kids and you sort of quietly critique their approach to parenting.

They're too lax. They're too strict. Right? You make negative assumptions about people based on what kind of car they drive or the size of their house. It's either too small or it's too big depending on your angle or their clothing.

Right? That's pride. Because you're ultimately saying, I am the measure of what is good and right, what is best. I'm the measure. I'm the yardstick. And these people fall short.

[9 : 0 8] Pride can manifest as self-sufficiency. Again, that doesn't look like pride. In our country, in our culture, we love self-sufficiency. We celebrate self-sufficiency and autonomy.

But you know, you have people, they always like to be the person that offers help, but they will never ask for help. They refuse to ask for help even when they might desperately need it.

See, that's another form of pride. Because you're saying, I should be able to do this myself. I'm not the kind of person who needs help.

Because there's something you're inferring there about that kind of person. I'm not the kind of person who needs help from anyone. I should be able to do this myself. That's a form of pride. Pride can manifest as chronic complaining.

Again, it doesn't seem like pride. You know, grumbling about things you don't like in your household. Or in your marriage. Or in your workplace. Or in the church.

[1 0 : 1 1] So that's pride. You're saying, you know, this thing doesn't, this isn't up to my standard. But I can't be troubled to actually do anything to solve the problem.

I'm expecting and waiting for other people to solve the problem for me. That's a form of pride. Probably one of the most harmful forms of pride, I would say, is self-pity.

Part of the reason it's harmful is it doesn't look like pride at all. Self-pity can look a lot like humility. It can look a lot like weakness. But in some ways, this is the most insidious form of pride.

Because real suffering can be involved. Real pain can be involved. But the difference is, instead of entrusting the pain and the injustice to the Lord. And seeking to move on.

Self-pity wants to cling to the pain. It wants to cling to the suffering. It wants to nurse the grudges. It inflates grievances.

[11 : 15] It tends to withhold forgiveness. To keep things going. And see, self-pity is a form of pride. Because like all forms of pride, self-pity actually keeps the focus on me.

It's all about my pain. It's all about my pain. It's all about my unfair treatment. It's all about the injustice that has been perpetrated against me.

And so because of this, self-pity keeps us locked in this kind of victim narrative about our lives. And we begin to see things through that lens. And so one of the ways it does harm is that it can blind you.

If you're caught up in your own self-pity, it can make you blind or numb to ways that you might be causing pain or hurt. Right? So if you try to go to a person who's caught up in their self-pity, and you try to share, hey, when you did this thing, when you said this thing, it really hurt me, what's going to happen is they're going to tend to play the victim.

They're going to get angry. They're going to accuse you of hurting them. They're going to flip the script. And instead of taking responsibility, instead of admitting their wrongs, they're going to paint you as the bad guy.

[12 : 31] Right? And because of this, self-pity can wreak havoc in a place like a church. It can cause lasting division because the church is very full of well-meaning people who want to love and support each other.

And so people will pour on the sympathy and the love and the support, not realizing that in some cases, when self-pity is at the root, you're actually enabling harmful and divisive patterns. Right?

But again, it's about me. And so all of these forms of pride are not immediately recognizable as pride, but they all have this one thing in common. They are ways of living with yourself at the center of your own life.

They're ways that say, I am at the center and I matter most. And because of this, pride destroys our relationships with others.

It ultimately destroys our relationship with God. The Dutch Reformed pastor, Andrew Murray, South African pastor, said this. He said, pride must die in you or nothing of heaven can live in you.

[13 : 36] Pride must die in you or nothing of heaven can live in you. So these are the symptoms. These are the issues. What's the underlying cause?

Why is pride such an issue? Where does it come from? The word that Paul uses in verse three is very illuminating. The Greek word that is translated in our version in the ESV as conceit is actually a compound word, kinodoxia.

And kinodoxia comes from two words. Kino, which means empty, and doxia, which means glory. Glory. So it literally means glory empty or empty of glory, right?

So the King James translates it in the word vainglory. You may have heard. Empty glory, right? It means glory empty. In other words, it conveys this idea that inside us there is this deep, gnawing, restless, relentless hunger for glory.

A hunger for respect. A hunger for respect. A hunger for admiration. A hunger for affirmation. And it's always there.

[14 : 50] It's an emptiness. It's a longing. It's a hunger for these things. In other words, you might put it like this. Pride is the result of a glory vacuum.

A glory vacuum in our souls. It's a spiritual void. And like all vacuums, it is constantly pulling at everything around it, trying to fill itself up.

You know, this is essentially how St. Augustine describes pride, if you read his confessions or his City of God. You know, pride isn't just an attitude.

He says that pride is actually a spiritual curvature of the soul. It is a curving inward of the soul. Homo incurvatus in say, man turned in on himself.

See, that's what a vacuum does. It pulls everything around it into itself. Everything curves inward because the vacuum is there. So St. Augustine would say, instead of having a properly ordered and oriented love, while we are focused outward, loving one another, loving our neighbors, loving God, this spiritual glory vacuum turns us inward.

[16 : 10] We're aimed in on ourselves. He says that's the fundamental problem with human beings. And so because of this, we become self-absorbed. We become self-defining.

We become self-glorifying. In curvatus in say. And the only way to be rid of this is to understand why the glory vacuum exists.

Why is there this hole? And the reason is because God made us to live with Him at the center. To live filled by His glory.

We're not made to radiate the light like the sun. We are made to be like the moon, reflecting the light. Our glory comes from the light that shines on us and in us and through us.

It's nothing that we generate. But the moment human beings started living for ourselves, the moment we displaced God and put ourselves at the center of our lives, that vacuum was created.

[17 : 18] And instead of being filled with the glory of God, we are glory hungry. We are glory starved. In his book, Love Within Limits, Lewis Smedes writes this.

He says, Pride is the arrogant refusal to let God be God. It is to grab God's status for oneself. Pride is turning down God's invitation to join the dance of life as a creature in his garden and wishing instead to be the creator, independent, reliant on one's own resources.

Pride is the grand illusion, the fantasy of fantasies, the cosmic put on, he says. The fantasy that we can make it as little gods leaves us empty at the center.

It's what he's talking about, the glory vacuum. So we learn what? We learn to swagger. We learn to bluff. We learn to use symbols to cover up our fears that we lack substance.

We force other people to act as buttresses for the shaky ego that pride created by emptying our soul of God.

[18 : 34] We'll say that last sentence one more time. I want you to think about this. A person who is controlled by pride will find it almost impossible to truly love other people.

Because love is ultimately a self-giving posture. Right? You're primarily concerning yourself with their well-being.

But if your well-being, the well-being of your fragile ego, is tied to that person, you're never going to be free to love them because you're going to need them too much.

You're going to need them to prop up your own shaky ego. And you can't, by definition, love someone if you're using them at the same time. And this glory vacuum of pride doesn't just hurt our individual relationships.

It sits behind a whole array of global, you know, social and political ills as well. There's a wonderful, famous commencement speech given in 1995 at Harvard by the former president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, where he observes that all of the problems we face in the modern West result from the fact that we have displaced God and put ourselves at the center.

[20 : 08] And he says because of this spiritual void in our collective heart, in the heart of Western civilization, that has led to a kind of collective pride.

We have forgotten our own creatureliness. We have forgotten our own limitations. It's a kind of functional atheism that leads to forms of pride that are ultimately horribly destructive to the world that we live in.

So he talks about this sitting behind things like environmental degradation. Because without God, people don't see the world as a beautifully ordered creation and a cosmos.

They simply see resources that can be exploited. Right? Right? Causing environmental crises such as pollution, deforestation, climate change.

It leads to consumeristic greed. Because instead of God at the center, because of that void, people try to fill the void with wealth and accumulation.

[21 : 09] Consumption. And of course, that fosters all kinds of social divisions and inequality and injustice. He says without God at the center, we have social fragmentation.

People lose a sense of a higher collective shared identity and purpose. There's no longer, he says, any shared concept of values that transcend us.

And so people increasingly feel isolated and balkanized and disconnected from community and tradition. And that leads to social and communal unrest and depression and psychological disorders.

And loneliness is labeled as pathological, a clinically significant issue leading to death for many people. It leads, of course, to political cynicism.

Because without God as an ultimate source of accountability, a source of authority that sits above every human authority, our leaders are guided solely by pragmatic self-interest.

[22 : 09] So they promote politics marked by corruption and deception. And over time, they lose trust among their citizens. So the root of everything that is wrong in our lives and everything that's wrong in the world is pride.

It's the glory vacuum at the center of our souls. So what can we do about this? Where does Paul bring us from here?

What's the cure? The short answer is we need to become humble. But there's a kind of, well, several issues with telling a room full of people like us, we need to become more humble.

The surest sign of health in your heart, I would say, is humility. Now, you might say, isn't it love?

Yes, it's love. But you need to understand humility is what gives you the capacity to love. Humility is what gives you the capacity to stop using people, to stop using God for your own ego.

[23 : 08] And instead, to actually truly give yourself away to other people and to God, to truly love, as we were created to do. The surest sign of a healthy soul is humility.

Here's Andrew Murray again. Humility is perfect quietness of heart. Just think about this and think about your own heart, your own life. Humility is perfect quietness of heart.

It is to be at rest when nobody praises me and when I am blamed or despised. It is to have a blessed home in the Lord where I can go and shut the door and kneel to my father in secret and am at peace as in a deep sea of calmness when all around and above is trouble.

Now, I read that. I don't know about you, but that's exactly what I want for my own heart. And it leads us to ask, how is that possible?

And I would say, number one, religion is not the answer. I know I look like I might not say that, but religion is not the answer. And in fact, some of you know this already from experience.

[24 : 20] You've seen this happen. Religion can be like pouring miracle grow on your pride. Religion creates all of the greenhouse conditions necessary for pride to grow from this little weed in your heart to this massive tree.

Religion furnishes us with all kinds of reasons to feel superior and better than other people. So religion is not the answer. Related to this, this is really the paradox of humility.

Paradox is this. If your focus is to become more humble, you write in your journal, you know, it's December 29th.

You're writing your resolutions for the new year. You say, I want to become more humble. You make that your goal. What's going to happen? You're going to focus on trying to be more humble. And then you're going to make progress.

Maybe. And then what happens if you make progress? Then you're going to feel really proud of yourself for making progress. And then you're going to need to undo that pride. Right? And it becomes this vicious cycle.

[25 : 26] The more you focus on being humble, the more at risk you are of feeling prideful about your humility. You'll be so proud of how humble you are. But what's more, even if that's not an issue for you, still, where's the focus in all of that?

The focus is still on you. It's on your heart. It's on your progress. It's on your goals. Right? So even if you're not bragging about how humble you are, the spotlight is still right where it always was.

It's still on you. So this is the trouble with humility. You cannot become more humble by deciding that you want to become more humble. I'm sorry. It's not that easy.

I wish it were. But you can't get it by aiming at it. If you aim at humility, you're never going to become humble. You're probably just going to become more proud. So you can't aim at it.

The best you will achieve is the appearance of humility. And I think that there's probably a lot of us and a lot of people in the world who are really good at appearing humble.

[26 : 28] Again, religion encourages that. We learn how to talk and act. You know, you win a huge award or you amass 100,000 followers. I'm so humbled by this award.

I'm so humbled by my million followers. I'm so humbled by my promotion. But we don't really sound that humble when we say it. That's hashtag humility.

It's not the real thing. You know, the quote, I can't remember who first said it. Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less.

So how do you become the kind of person who simply doesn't think about yourself all that often? There's only one way to do it. And that is to stop focusing on yourself entirely by focusing on someone else.

That's the only way it's going to happen. Instead of focusing on our own hearts, on our own souls, on our own need for humility, we have to focus on the glory of another.

[27 : 29] That's the only way to fill that glory vacuum. And if we look at the last half of this passage in Philippians 2, commentators agree that verses 6 through 10 are actually a hymn.

You know, this is most likely a hymn that had been composed about the nature of Jesus Christ and his incarnation, his sacrifice, his death, and resurrection. What we're celebrating this week.

Right? This was a hymn that had been composed so that the church could sing it. Because the church needed a way of focusing on glory outside of themselves. And I would say if ever there was a passage worth memorizing in the Bible, in the New Testament, it would be this passage.

Because this is meant to ignite in us, not a sense of our own glory and importance, but to fill us with a sense of the glory of Jesus Christ and what he has done, what he has accomplished.

What does it say? Look, Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself.

[28 : 32] Same word. Kino, he emptied himself by taking the form of a servant. It holds out before us in this great hymn, he in every way was equal with God, part of the divine eternal dance of the Trinity.

And he thought that not a thing to be grasped or clinged to or held on to, but he emptied himself. Of what? Of his glory. He emptied himself of his glory.

And he became a servant. He became a slave. He humbled himself. Think of the triumphal entry that we celebrate today. This amazing moment where the true king of the world enters in, but immediately we see that this king is unlike any king we've ever seen.

And therefore, this kingdom is unlike any earthly kingdom we have ever seen or will ever see. There are clues that something very different is happening. He's not riding in on a great war horse.

He's riding in on the colt of a donkey. He's not riding in to go and ultimately take the throne. He's riding in to ultimately, in a few days' time, be nailed to the cross.

[29 : 43] Right? His coronation is his crucifixion. Something very different is happening. And we already see it.

Therefore, it says, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name. So at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father. Here's the gospel. Jesus emptied himself so that we might become full. It's the only way to fill up that glory vacuum is the glory of the cross, the glory of the death, the glory of the resurrection, the glory of the victory over sin and death, the glory over the renewal of creation.

That's the glory that we're meant to be filled with. Not a glory that looks inward, but a glory that looks outward and upward. The only way to become truly humble is to keep our eyes fixed firmly on the cross.

That is the only way. To quote Murray one more time, here is the path to the higher life. Down.

[31 : 01] Lower down. And he uses the metaphor of water. He says, just as water always seeks to fill the lowest place, the more we lower ourselves before the cross, the more God's glory and power flow in to fill us up.

I love that image. So for those of us who are soul sick with pride, look to the cross. This is a week where we will journey with Jesus Christ through his passion, through the last supper on Monday, Thursday, and the new commandment, through the horrific events of Good Friday and the crucifixion, through the ambiguity, uncertainty, confusion, failure, of the tomb, and ultimately to the unexpected, world-changing hope of the resurrection.

It is a week where we're invited to look firmly and fully at the cross and what it means for us and to recognize that Jesus has ushered in a completely new way of being human, an upside-down, right-side-up reality where true glory is found by seeking the glory of another.

Where the way to lead and to rule is to serve. Where the way into abundant life is to be willing to lay down your life for the sake of those whom you love.

This is the invitation to becoming fully and truly human. Let's pray. Lord, we are hopeless if these are mere ideas.

[32 : 50] And yet we know that you are here with us now, that you have power to be present with us, to speak to us in our hearts. Whereas human words can only reach our ears, you can speak to the heart.

And Lord, we know that it's only in your power and through your glory, that we can be filled with your glory, that we can become more truly the people we have created to be.

To truly love you and others in true humility. Lord, we need your Holy Spirit to make that possible in us. We pray that as we continue in the prayers and the singing as we come around our table, that Lord, as we encounter you, that we can be filled by your glory.

And that that would right-size our opinion of ourselves, that it would right-size the attitude that we have, that it would put everything back into proportion and set us free to love.

And we pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.