

SOUL CARE 3: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS
COLOSSIANS 3
MARCH 18, 2018

Almost 120 years ago Herman Melville wrote a book that is now considered one of the great American classics, *Moby Dick*. If you haven't read *Moby Dick* in a long time, or even if you have never read it, you probably know the general premise. A man named Ishmael signs on for the crew of a whaling ship. As they get underway, they realize this is no ordinary journey. Their leader, Captain Ahab, has a singular goal in mind, finding the white whale, Moby Dick. In a previous encounter, this huge white whale bit off his leg at the knee and Captain Ahab has a singular mission, vengeance.

As the story progresses, Captain Ahab becomes more and more erratic in his behavior. He cannot see past his anger and thirst for vengeance. So much so, that he refuses the opportunity to make money on the whaling expedition, refuses to stop and help other whaling boats in need and ultimately gets tangled in the harpoon rope in a final fight with the whale and is dragged to his death beneath the ocean waters.

For over a hundred years, scholars and critics have sought to mine the depths of this book's meaning. Most agree it has a lot of meanings. They just aren't sure exactly what they are. It's Biblical with its use of terms. It deals with race. It deals with slavery, but when you look at the big picture, its message is quite simple. One man is undone by anger and the desire for vengeance.

The question for you to ponder today is, do you think our country is angry? A follow up question is, do you think we are angrier than we used to be? A nation where a majority of the people claim to be Christians has become one of the angriest places in human history. Road rage is common. Have you ever been flipped off by an elderly lady? I have. Have you ever found

yourself stewing with anger while waiting in line? Have you ever found yourself yelling at loved ones or friends?

I want to take it all one step further. I think most of us here have experienced and offered episodes of anger, when we get cut off, when a loved one hurts us, when politics or the workplace gets messy. We all have experienced episodes of anger, but it seems like now more and more people are in a season of anger, always on edge, always one click away from blowing up, always moments away from outrage. Have you seen this? Have you experienced this? A simmering anger for a season that just lurks and more than occasionally spills over. How does this happen? Maybe more importantly, what can we do about it?

We are in the third week of our series leading up to Easter, and we are tackling the essential issue of soul care. How do you care for your soul? We will find out today the role anger and a lack of anger plays in your soul care, but before we get further into that, I want to make sure we are all on the same page about what the soul actually is.

I heard a great seminar on the soul by John Ortberg, who stole it from Dallas Willard, who stole it from Aquinas, who stole it from Augustine. The point is, the credit isn't to me. This whole seminar was about your soul, and that is a confusing thing to understand. The major prevailing fallacy of the soul is the Looney Tunes fallacy. You know that moment when Sylvester the cat takes a frying pan to the head and you see a ghost-like version of Sylvester rising to the sky. That is the Looney Tunes fallacy. That your soul is some wispy version of you. That it is the ghostly version of you that will ascend to heaven when you die.

The problem is that's not what anyone using the word "soul" meant during the telling and composition of Biblical stories. The shorthand is this, your soul is your fully integrated self. It is your will, your brain, your body and your presence in this world. To greatly clarify this, Dallas Willard says that trees have souls, not that they have eternal spirits or conscience but a soul is simply the integrated being. A tree is made up of different parts performing different tasks,

roots gathering nutrients, trunk providing core strength, branches with leaves reaching out for the sun, but it is still one integrated tree. That might sound simple because it is.

The problem for us, unlike a tree, is that we are prone to disintegrate. What we conjure in our will might agree with our thoughts, but our body chooses different actions. To cover for our disintegration, we present ourselves in society in congruence with our will, but incongruent with our actions/bodies. This is disintegration, and it leads to a soul in disrepair. It's that ache that you feel when sin is comfortable in your life. When you want to do something good but you don't. When you want to avoid something bad but you don't. This is what leads Paul to say, "The things I want to do I don't do and the things I don't want to do I do." His, like ours, is often a disintegrating soul.

When Jesus says, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and yet forfeit his soul." He is not just referring to the person who has lots of sex, money and pleasure but spends eternity apart from God. He is talking about the person who is not integrated before God. A whole, complete soul that is at rest before God.

The perfect example of this is Gollum from the *Lord of the Rings* stories. He is that man who used to be Smiegel, but he became enamored with this ring. This ring that represents great power. If you have that ring, you really could gain the whole world, and that ring turns Smiegel into Gollum. Golem is actually a Hebrew word in Psalm 139. It means unformed flesh, also known as the disintegrated person. One that is not fully formed. We can disintegrate and that is what Gollum does. He becomes a walking corpse. He becomes something he was never meant to be. When Jesus says what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul, that could be a point about eternity, but I think it is very much to do with the here and now. Losing the one thing that is most important can happen so easily.

Colossians 3:1-11

Paul starts out by reminding them of a profound gospel motif. They are dead to who they were and they are now alive in Christ. When you become a follower of Jesus, you die to your old self and you put on the new mantle of “Christ Follower.” With the work of the Holy Spirit, you look and act differently than you used to. The problem, of course, is Paul is writing to people who are followers of Christ. They have the Holy Spirit, and they are still struggling with their old ways of immorality, greed and anger. So it is simple. You are a new creation and should look different, but it isn’t so simple because it is still a struggle.

Paul basically addresses three categories of sin here in his morality list, sexual immorality, greed and anger. Now is this a random list? Maybe, but probably not. I think Paul is spending time on three of the most integral functions of human life that can easily get manipulated and askew. Sex and money are two of the most primary needs for many people. Sex can be many things but at its best and most central it is about intimacy. Money can be many things, but at its best and most central it is about security. Do those sound like two central human needs/desires, intimacy and security? This is where we find anger.

I was told quite a while ago that anger is almost always caused by unmet expectations. Think about it. When someone runs late that upsets your expectation for timeliness. When someone veers into your lane, that upsets your expectation for safety. When you root for the 49ers, that upsets your expectations of winning. Do you see how that works? Anger is often caused by unmet expectations. Paul starts out with two central human desires/needs, intimacy and security. The ways we seek it that are not in accordance with God’s plan via immorality and greed. Then he launches into anger because anger is about unmet expectations and there are often unmet expectations when it comes to intimacy and security.

Here’s something I don’t want you to miss today when it comes to anger. It is basically your “check engine light.” Or for our purposes today, your “check soul light.” I understand an

episode of anger when someone veers into your lane or hurts you at work, but if you are in a season of anger, then your “check engine light” is on. Anger can be the issue itself, but it is usually letting you know something is wrong under the hood. Somewhere under there, you are wrestling with unmet expectations and anger is the byproduct, not the root issue.

Last week we were down to one car over the weekend as one was getting worked on, so I ubered to church and back. On the way home, I asked the man about his life, and it turns out he is only here in the area for a short time to settle a legal matter. He was born in America but has lived in Thailand for the last 25 years. With his unique perspective of being born in America, living recently in Thailand and freshly back, I asked him what the biggest difference was between our cultures. Do you know what it was? Anger. He said the people of Thailand earnestly try not to hurt each other in interpersonal connections, and a lot of it stems from their Buddhist approach to the world. Then he said it’s almost like people here are trying to do just the opposite. Intentionally lashing out in anger. The Buddhist nation is managing their anger. The Christian one? Not so much.

The “check engine light” is on in this country, and a lot of it probably comes from violations and loss of intimacy and security. The heated debates erupt around money and sexuality, but we are really fighting about intimacy and security especially when it seems like they are being lost.

Paul calls on the Colossians to put aside immorality, greed and anger, but as we already said, that is easy to say but hard to do. Especially since he has to remind them of it, that means it doesn’t come naturally and isn’t produced easily. What do we do with anger?

Colossians 3:12-17

He has said to set aside immorality, greed and anger and now he says put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. These are very similar to Jesus’ preaching from the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are the meek, blessed are humble, blessed are the

peacemakers. Just as a reminder for you, when Jesus says blessed, he doesn't mean if you do these things God will then bless you. He is saying, doing these things naturally leads to blessing. The Greek word here for blessing is makarios. It literally means happy.

When Paul is pushing back against immorality, greed and anger, he is offering a better solution, blessed/happy living. If you have any depth of experience in life dabbling on the wrong side of the spiritual tracks, I think you probably know sexual immorality, greed and anger all actually feel good in the short term. But when lived with and repeated again and again, they actually leave the person feeling miserable like Gollum. A shell of our old selves clinging on to one precious sin that is corroding and disintegrating our souls. Paul is not just saying stop doing bad stuff and start doing good stuff. He is giving them a prescription. He is showing them the way to happy/blessed living. He has seen that the "check engine light" is on, and he has the solution.

This portion of what he is offering is not only the solution to eradicating anger and vices, it is the means. We have talked about this many times before, but the greatest solution to removing sin in your life is via replacement. It simply doesn't work to white knuckle it and try really hard and say, "Don't get angry. Don't get angry. Don't lust. Don't be greedy." You have to replace. This is a Biblical principle again and again. Instead of passively waiting all day to not get angry, you actively pursue love. Instead of trying to avoid wrath, malice and slander, you actively hold out compassion, kindness and forgiveness.

This is the beauty of this death to the old self and new life in Christ. The beauty of putting away sins and picking up virtues. It's not just the solution. It is the means. When you do this, these virtues will push out and replace the vices. I want you to think for a moment about someone who makes you angry. Go ahead and visualize them. Maybe they are sitting next to you at this very moment. Instead of saying, I will try my best to not get angry at them this week, I will instead creatively think of ways to bless them this week. Actively. Intentionally.

I know you know this, but the success will be two-fold. You will feel better, blessed and happy, but you will also disarm their anger and wrath.

Sarah Silverman is a crude atheistic comedian. She is also brilliant and thoughtful. On social media recently, she posted something, and a young man simply responded by calling her a really crude name. Instead of taking the bait, she actually responded with love. She began a conversation that led to the young man admitting he had been abused at a young age and now had severe back problems and no money to do anything about it. By the end of the conversation, she had raised money for him to see a doctor, and he was supported by hundreds of people from the internet.

https://twitter.com/jeremy_jamrozy/status/949371343312736258?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.washingtonpost.com%2Fnews%2Finspired-life%2Fwp%2F2018%2F01%2F08%2Fa-man-trolled-sarah-silverman-on-twitter-she-ended-up-helping-him-with-his-medical-problems%2F&tfw_creator=alliklein&tfw_site=WashingtonPost

Instead of trying not to get angry, Sarah Silverman intentionally showed love. If a crude atheist comedian can do it, can't we?

I want to make it clear today that anger isn't a sin. It's what we do with it. Jesus got angry at religious professionals for treating church like a bank. Jesus got mad at Peter for denying the path of the messiah. Jesus got mad at people who hurt children. But Jesus' anger didn't lead him to sin, and most of the time he wasn't angry. In fact, angry people arrested him, angry people whipped his flesh and angry people nailed him to a cross, and in that moment, he showed love. He said, "Father, forgive them." Instead of simply avoiding anger, he actively chose love.

Herman Melville actually wasn't very successful in his lifetime. People really only began to appreciate his work long after his death. In his later years, he worked at a customs house in New York and wrote poetry. One of his poems was a reflection upon the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the death of Jesus of Nazareth called "The Martyr." Here is the first part:

*Good Friday was the day
Of the prodigy and crime,
When they killed him in his pity,
When they killed him in his prime
Of clemency and calm—
When with yearning he was filled
To redeem the evil-willed,
And, though conqueror, be kind;
But they killed him in his kindness,
In their madness, in their blindness,
And they killed him from behind.*

*There is sobbing of the strong,
And a pall upon the land;
But the People in their weeping
Bare the iron hand:
Beware the People weeping
When they bare the iron hand.*

Those final words are quite haunting. The people in their weeping bare the iron hand. Beware the people weeping when they bare the iron hand. Melville is noting how easily following the death of a compassionate emancipator like Christ or Lincoln that the aggrieved people can easily lose their way and strike back with an iron hand. People will hurt you this week. People will make you angry this week. When your check engine light goes on, I encourage you to put

down the old in favor of the new. To replace anger with love. To drop the iron hand and embrace the way of the cross.