

"To Your Soul Be True: Let Your Soul Nourish You"
Matthew 6:1-8

A few weeks ago, I felt faint for a couple of mornings. It wasn't anything serious, but it just didn't feel right. After a few tests, wearing a heart monitor for 48 hours, I was surprised to discover the simple answer to my problem: I wasn't eating enough **protein!** At first, I didn't want to believe it, but as I became more intentional about eating more protein, the problem disappeared. As a result, I became aware of all the available medical advice about getting more protein. There are so many ads, videos, and literature on this subject. Nurturing our bodies with the right nutrition is a multi-billion-dollar industry.

This experience made me think about the **nurture that comes from our souls**. I used to think that I needed to feed my soul, but I've learned that the soul is the essence that gives meaning and power to every aspect of our human experience. Since the soul is the overarching essence of who we are, how do we let it feed us?

Even though we are designed to allow the richness of our souls to help us flourish, our struggles in life often get in the way. One of the best descriptions of the blockages we experience comes from Cynthia Bourgeault in her book on Centering Prayer. She illustrates how our soul's energies get squandered and blocked.

Thomas Keating envisioned that within our unconscious, there are **Energy Centers** storing our programs for happiness, built around exaggerated needs for **Security/Survival, Affection/Esteem, and Power/Control**, as well as our Socially Conditioned Beliefs. A huge amount of psychic energy, resident in our bodies, surrounds these Energy Centers. They are typically created by repressed or undealt-with traumas from our youth.

Let's look at an example of how these energy centers operate in our daily lives. Imagine you're standing in line, and someone cuts in front of you. We may feel slighted and indignant. The other person's behavior might trigger one of our social aversions, rooted in an energy center of esteem, control, or security. These afflictive emotions then lead us into emotional turmoil and internal dialogue. The same chain of reactions can happen when we make a mistake or fall short. We might start feeling inadequate, triggered by the energy center of our sense of lack of affection and esteem. Most of our days are spent in these cycles.

Bourgeault notes that, "we usually don't realize how much of our vital life energy is bound up and unconsciously leached away in those 'energy centers'... The energy of our being remains bound, at a frequency too slow and too self-preoccupied to sustain real inner awakening... We develop Conscious Attachments and Aversions that drive

our values and behaviors in order to avoid experiencing negative feelings associated with these Energy Centers. When an exterior event directly challenges our Attachments or Aversions, we experience negative energy bubbling up from our body, and some frustrating emotion begins to surface."

Jesus' Proactive Approach to Soul Nurture

Jesus knew all about these patterns of blocking the flow of the soul and of God's Spirit in our lives, but he also knew what it would take to help us. In our reading for today, Jesus offers a **proactive approach** to allowing the flow of the soul's power. He warned people against public practices of piety because they often only fed into the unconscious emotional programs for happiness, specifically those rooted in our needs for esteem and control.

The people Jesus was addressing would have been familiar with the practices of public prayers that heaped praise and power on the emperor and leaders. Prayer was often part of a patronage system, glorifying city patrons and those who funded public works. In a way, God was also seen as the ultimate patron. Many in the ancient world saw God this way. The Roman Empire of the first century held a belief system of *quid pro quo* prayer, where one asked God for a favor and then offered something to the gods. The deity supposedly needed sacrifices and praise to dispense favors. Those who fell on hard times were seen as cursed by God. Prayer became a tool for the human ego to show or seek God's favor.

An example from our world today comes from Presbyterian Pastor Ted Wardlaw, who tells of a visit from a slick church supply salesperson early in his ministry. The hot new item for youth groups was a game called "Dollars and Sense" (s-e-n-s-e). But, as you'll see, it actually made very little sense. It was a board game much like Monopoly, touted as "Great at teaching youth about 'Christian economics.'" This is how it worked: if players landed on a square labeled "college graduate," they received a certain sum of money; on "middle-level executive," a greater sum; and on "company president," a very large sum indeed.

Now remember, according to the salesperson, this was all a lesson in Christian economics. More rules of the game: regardless of the money received, if they gave 10 percent to the "church" square on the board, they would reap a bonanza if they landed on the "shower of blessings" square, being showered with all the money in the game's jackpot. Dollars and Sense.

Wardlaw was, to say the least, not impressed. "I think that's a crass lesson to teach a child," he told the salesperson. The salesperson didn't flinch. Looking Wardlaw straight in the eye, he said, "Yes, Reverend, but isn't that the way the world works?"

The Secret Chambers of the Soul

Jesus knew about the temptations to use prayer to get what we wanted, whether from society or from God. He knew about the patronage system and how it was used to control people and maintain the power of the elite. Jesus challenged these ways of thinking by telling his followers that God was not a heavenly benefactor who needed praise and adoration to bestow favors. The human systems of power and esteem have no place in the Kingdom of God. God was the opposite of that kind of system. **Prayer, for Jesus, is about a transformative relationship** that turns our world of fear and anger upside down for the sake of healing and peace. In the Kingdom of God, Jesus proclaimed a vision where doing God's work in the world is the motivation, without the rewards that appeal to our egos and the social systems that oppress and abuse the needy. The main remedy Jesus offers to the social ills of domination in our world is the **practice of spirituality in secret**. This isn't about being modest in prayer or not talking about one's faith in public. It's about letting go of emotional attachments to learn to enter the chambers of the soul.

Let's listen to Jesus' words from Matthew 6:1-8:

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

Letting Your Soul Nurture You

Jesus' words call us to a deeper, more authentic spiritual practice. He invites us to move beyond external validation and the endless cycles of our energy centers. He's not just talking about physical rooms; he's talking about the **inner room**, the sanctuary within each of us where the divine dwells.

When we practice our faith "in secret," in the inner room of our heart, we are not hiding our light. Instead, we are disengaging from the systems of performance and reward that drain our vital energy. We are freeing ourselves from the need for external affirmation that only feeds our exaggerated needs for security, esteem, and control. This secret practice allows us to release the energy bound up in those unaddressed traumas and programmed responses.

Think of it like this: just as my body needed protein to thrive, our souls need to be unburdened from the endless striving for external validation. When we enter that inner room, we create space for God's Spirit to flow freely, unhindered by the noise and demands of the world or our egoic attachments.

In this sacred inner space, our soul, which is the very essence of who we are, can begin to nurture us. It's where we quiet the internal dialogue driven by fear and inadequacy. It's where we stop trying to earn God's favor or human praise. It's where we simply *abide* in the presence of the One who knows what we need before we even ask.

This is where true healing begins, where our soul energy is reclaimed, and where we discover the boundless wellspring of peace and strength that resides within us. When your soul is nurtured from within, it can then pour out into the world, not from a place of seeking, but from a place of overflowing abundance.

How do you take these words of Jesus about prayer to heart? How do you practice them today? Can you imagine this inner room within you where the divine dwells, a place where your soul is truly free to nurture you?

May each day be an opportunity for you to go into your inner room and let the Holy One love and nourish you so that you may live knowing that it is always well with your soul! Amen.