The Often-Overlooked Reality of Leadership

The day started strong.

A couple hundred men rolling out early on a Saturday morning for a men's conference. That's good. Chow down carne asada breakfast burritos. That's even better. Ahhh, but how do you capture and sustain such culinary momentum? Easy. You follow it up with MAN GAMES. Push-ups. Arm wrestling. Hula hoop. Topped off by how much soda you can chug in 60 seconds (which turned out pretty much like you would imagine!).

While I'm still not sure how we pulled off any kind of segue, somehow we shifted our focus to the theme de jour, **The Soul of a Leader**. To place the topic of the soul into its proper context, we set up shop in the middle of a question—a provocative, disruptive one—that Jesus dropped on His followers: *What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?*

In pursuit of that ultimate question, I posed three more: Why is your soul so important? How do you assess the state of your soul? And how do you fight for your soul?

Why is our soul so important?

Reflecting on the writings of prominent authors Dallas Willard and John Ortberg, the soul—the life center of our existence—is the silent, unseen operating system running behind all that we are and all that we do. As such, our soul not only enlivens all we do, but it integrates all the parts of our life (will, mind, body) into a single, organic whole. Depending on its health, your soul will either fill your life with purpose or drain it with despair. In short, the soul is the sole determiner of the quality and meaning of your very existence.

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In his book, *Building Below the Waterline*, Gordon MacDonald poignantly addresses the significance of the soul in the life of a leader:

The forming of the soul that it might be a dwelling place for God is the primary work of the Christian leader. This is not an add-on, an option, or a third-level priority. Without this core activity, one almost guarantees that he or she will not last in leadership for a lifetime, or that what work is accomplished will become less and less reflective of God's honor and God's purposes.

How do you assess the state of your soul?

Of the many warning signs that indicate that your soul is shrinking, here are a few to consider.

• You know your soul is in trouble when your thoughts and pursuits go no further than yourself.

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• You know your soul is in trouble when circumstances dictate the direction of your life and dominate your attitude about life.

• You know your soul is in trouble when your desire to indulge (e.g., food, alcohol, spending, etc.) is out of control.

• You know your soul is in trouble when you feel distant from God and distant from people.

How do you fight for your soul?

That morning, I gave the men of our church four soul-keeping tools.

• **Settle the big question.** At some point in life, every person must come to terms with the truth that their soul will NEVER be satisfied apart from God. Any effort to exempt or marginalize God places one's life at risk.

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• **Make first things first.** In his must-read book, *Soul-Keeping*, John Ortberg repeatedly calls out the reality that the soul is the most important thing about you and that you are its keeper. Paying attention to your soul takes prominence over all else. The care of the soul dare not slip into second place.

• **Live honestly.** The New Testament reminds us of the ongoing conflict between the Spirit and the sinful nature within every Christ-follower. The presence of sin works against everything your soul is designed for. For the soul to thrive, we must truthfully confront and combat anything that competes against God and His agenda for our lives.

• **Create space.** As the keepers of our souls, our fundamental task is to create space for God to do His essential and ongoing work of restoring our souls. In the rhythm of our lives, we need to regularly and intentionally make room for God to attend to our souls—souls that are so easily distracted and so quickly depleted.

At the close of our gathering that Saturday morning, I re-read Jesus' unsettling question: *What good will it*

be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

My final question…to them…to myself…to you: Today, in view of this truth, what needs to change in your life?

It's an important question.

With an even more important answer.