

**THE CHALLENGE TO  
SELF-POSSESSION**

## **Spirit, Soul, Body— Knowing Yourself**

As living human beings, you and I are set in certain relationships to the seen and unseen worlds. Our understanding of these relationships may be clear, or murky and obscure, or even baffling, depending on the accuracy of our knowledge, and upon how we stand, act, and live in terms of *total reality*—meaning *all that is real and that bears on life and being and eternity*.

The Christian is in a far better position to understand this, if he will exercise himself to do so, than even a brilliant, unbelieving psychologist or rational thinker. No one who believes there is no God, or who thinks there is no devil or evil spirits, no heaven or hell, lives in reality, even if realism lies at the heart of his intention. He lives in severely truncated reality, limited to what he sees and understands, and he is not finally able to handle his true existential situation.

A blind man lives *in* total visible reality but cannot see any of it and so must grope. A spiritually blind individual lives *in* total reality without being aware of vast and powerful elements in it. That robs and disarms him with respect to truth and evil, but changes nothing except his own ability to deal adequately with reality.

Unregenerate man is ever thus disarmed. The Greeks, in their love of wisdom—philosophy—had one great motto for their intellectual pursuits: Know yourself. Yet neither the Greeks with their many philosophies, nor any of the succeeding nations that engaged in this pursuit of wisdom, have been able to find this understanding of self.

Otherwise there would be no need for the constant rise of new philosophies, and the discarding of others, nor would man be at an ever more apparent loss in understanding himself, despite the many modern schools of psychology and psychiatry.

The knowledge of self eludes us, remaining always beyond our grasp. The attempts of man to arrive at it purely by reason fail, as they do, because there is more to man than reason can account for. Put biblical truth at the center of the human equation, however, and many things about man and his situation that were elusive come into focus.

Since man lost his communion with God through sin and thereby lost a true understanding of himself and his reason for being, and since all attempts by unregenerate man to regain this understanding (who am I, and where did I come from, why am I here, and where am I going?) have so obviously failed, is it truly possible for man to understand himself?

There is a way. What man cannot find out, God has chosen to reveal to him.

The Bible says, "*For what man knows the things of man, save the spirit of man which is in him?*" (1 Corinthians 2:11, κλν)

In these words we are given the clear beginning of an understanding of man. In form, the verse is a question, but actually it is a statement of an essential fact. It says that what cannot be imparted to us by our minds can be given to us by another faculty. A man cannot truly know the things of a man by the mind alone, but he can know by "the spirit of man which is in him."

Few people would be able to explain this because the very term "spirit of man" is not understood by most. Vague religious notions attached to such terms only impede our understanding. With respect to the essential nature of human beings, some people confound spirit and soul and think they are the same.

It is of great importance to understand the makeup of man, the structure of his being.

God created man in His own image; therefore man is tripartite or, more accurately, triune: spirit, soul, and body. In closing his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote: "I pray God your whole *spirit* and *soul* and *body* be kept blameless" (1 Thessalonians 5:23, com).

That is the sum of what man is. Fail to understand this, and it can be guaranteed that we will fail to understand the nature of man.

Someone may ask what makes it so vital for a person to possess this

understanding. There are several reasons. Satan is always working to keep man deceived about himself, because by such common deceptions he is able to keep millions in bondage and under the power of sin or demons.

Some people are drawn, in the vanity of their minds, to estimate man above his true station, even to magnify man against God. Others are led to take such a diminished view of man that they refuse to believe that God would take an interest in such a lowly creature. Either extreme denies man a true understanding of himself. Either extreme denies him an understanding of himself in relationship to God.

To understand how evil spirits work to undermine human well-being, it is necessary to have some grasp of the nature of man: the nature of man as God intended him to be, and the nature of man as he is.

If you were to get a wrong set of instructions for a mechanism with which you were unfamiliar, your understanding of it would not correspond to the actual nature of the thing itself. A wrong understanding of the nature of man—even when that understanding is satisfyingly complex and apparently profound—can, when it is applied in an effort to help a man, do him little good, and it may do him considerable harm.

In this, the good *intentions* of the one attempting to help are of little account; what really counts is the *accuracy of his understanding* as far as it goes.

Shakespeare was moved to write the exclamatory phrase, "What a piece of work is a man!" Man is, indeed, an incomparable piece of work, created in the image of God, and the Bible teaches very clearly that he is: spirit/soul/body.

These terms are not self-explanatory, except in the case of the body, about which most of us have some basic understanding.

It is no accident that Paul mentioned these terms in the order in which he did, for that order places them in their right relationships to man's whole being. In regard to their mutual functions it also sets them in their right relationship to each other. Finally, it places them in their right relationship to the living God. The progression as he gives it—spirit, soul, body—proceeds from the innermost to the outermost parts of a human being.

For a crude illustration of man's nature, we might think of a peach. The core of the peach is the nut, which is surrounded by the pit, which in turn is surrounded by the fruit flesh—corresponding in this order to spirit, soul, and body.

That gives you some picture of the elements of a man in their actual arrangement. The soul is set within the body, and the spirit is deeply set within the soul.

The spirit is the very core of man. It is in the spirit that man has his God-given primary capacity to commune with God, who is Spirit and who must be worshiped in spirit and in truth. It is the shrine in which spiritual life is centered.

The spirit expresses itself through the soul. The soul, in turn, expresses itself through the physical body.

The body is the outer man, the soul is the inner man, the spirit is the innermost man. When all three of these are fully alive and free of sin, and functioning in their right relationships to each other, you have a human being as God made him to be.

But that is not what you find. Instead, you find human beings with all kinds of impairments and distortions and imbalances, and you find men in whom the wrong part of their being exercises undue control over their whole being.

To fully understand the rather simple basics that are set forth above and that immediately follow, it may be necessary for you to read these lines slowly and with deliberate, thoughtful concentration; perhaps to read them carefully a second time. For unless these basics are understood, the applications that follow will not be understood.

Dr. Andrew Murray, a superlative Bible expositor, wrote that *it is through the spirit that man stands "related to the spiritual world."*

Dr. Murray also penned these telling lines:

"The spirit is the seat of our God-consciousness; the soul of our self-consciousness; the body of our world-consciousness. In the spirit, God dwells; in the soul, self; in the body, sense."

Understand these words, and you will be well on your way to an understanding of the nature of man.

In this, Dr. Murray was speaking of man as he was meant to be. Self dwells in the soul and sense in the body in every case, but God does not dwell in the spirit of an unsaved man. The fact is that evil spirits may dwell in the part of a man meant for the indwelling of God, or it may be an empty, darkened faculty.

We tend to think—I know I did for a long time—of the soul as some extremely vague inner principle—a kind of pale ghost that you can't quite put your finger on. That renders the expression "saving the soul" virtually unintelligible because we don't know what it is that is being saved.

The soul is the human being within the body. It is the you resident in your body. It is the real you. The self.

Your mind, your will, your emotions, and the ability to express personality are all powers and aspects of your soul. (So also are your gifts and talents, except the chiefly physical.)

The soul includes the mind and the will of a man—all the powers of intellect and volition. In its whole makeup, the soul is the essential and distinctive you, the true inner person. At the resurrection, your saved soul will be united with a new immortal body: “For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable . . . mortal nature must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:52-53, RSV).

A man’s personality and his emotions reside in the soul. It can be accurately said that a man’s personality is the expression *of* his soul, but a man’s personality is expressed *by* his body.

The soul expresses itself through the physical body. The emotions are expressed by facial expressions and physical gestures and words, and the thoughts are expressed in words and actions. If the emotions of a man’s soul are agitated by anger or fear, his face and body will reflect that, or if his emotions are joyful, his countenance will reflect that.

The human soul is the seat of the emotions. The emotions are felt and experienced in the soul, but they are expressed, insofar as they are outwardly expressed, by the body.

So the term “saving the soul” refers to the saving of the essential you—mind, will, personality, character—as distinguished from your physical body.

Genesis 2:7 shows that man had a body, which God formed out of the dust, *before* man had life. It was when God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” that “man became a *living soul*.”

“A living soul” is the essential man. It has been helpfully said that “man *is* a soul, and he *has* a body.”

The mouth, the larynx, the tongue, the lips speak—but do the lips really speak? No. It is the man in the body who is speaking, and his soul is employing his bodily equipment through which to speak. You can use your lips by an act of will to form any words you wish. When your lips speak, it is not your body primarily that is talking; it is you, the real you, the inner man, the soul.

The outward members of your body are instruments you use to carry out the intentions of your soul. If, in an accident, I were to lose the use of an arm, I would after recovery not be essentially any less myself. My soul would remain intact. It would simply have fewer bodily mechanisms to use, by which to express itself.

Ultimately the soul will be transferred, once, from house to house! The present body will perish (or, if Christ returns while we are yet alive,

it will be changed in a moment) and the redeemed soul will dwell forever in a new spiritual body subject to no pain or deterioration—a body similar in form to the mortal body, yet different, new and perfect.

“Our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, *who will change our lowly body to be like His glorious body*, by the power which enables Him to subject all things to Himself” (Philippians 3:20-21, RSV).

Though man is tripartite in his makeup, and though each of these three parts is distinct, man’s trinity is fused into a true union.

The brain, for example, is the seat of the mind. The brain is part of the body. The mind is a part of the soul.

The mind is certainly greater than the brain. The thoughts that come to us come to our minds. They are received, stored, or dispatched by the brain as instructions to our members. *The brain is the command center of the mind for the body.* The brain relates the mind to the body.

Even a dictionary definition helps show this:

*The Random House Dictionary* defines the word *mind* as “the element, part, substance, or process that reasons, thinks, feels, wills, perceives, judges, etc.”

Of the word *brain* it says: “The part of the central nervous system enclosed in the cranium of man and other vertebrates, consisting of a soft, convoluted mass of gray and white matter and serving to control and coordinate the mental and physical actions.”

Alternatively, it speaks of the “brain as the *center* of thought, understanding, etc.; mind, intellect” (italics added).

The will of the human soul controls the thought processes of the brain. It is able to direct the brain, to redirect it, to check it.

A thought flies into your mind, seemingly out of nowhere. It may be an idle thought, a creative thought, an unpleasant thought, or an evil thought. It may be about virtually anything from the label on a soup can to the nature of the universe. When the thought comes to mind, the will can direct the brain to receive it, reject it, ponder it, expand on it, or it can redirect the brain to some other, more useful avenue of thought.

It is through the body that man—man’s soul—stands related to the external world. His physical senses apprehend—see, hear, taste, touch, or smell—the realm of nature and his surroundings. His physical powers enable a man to act upon his environment.

Then there is the spirit. It is this, above all, that makes man unique. By this part of his being, a man may be in touch with the spiritual realm.

The human spirit gives man his spiritual capacity. It is by this that people may worship God as He desires to be worshiped “in spirit and in