

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 46

Paul's Anthropological Terms – The Composite Man

In the late 1970's, I went to hear one of my favorite preachers teach a series on living our faith. In one lesson, he used 1 Thessalonians 5:23 as a launching point to teach on the “spirit, soul, and body” of man. In the passage, Paul wrote:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The preacher used this passage to teach that the “complete” man was made up of three parts – spirit, soul, and body.

The preacher used the 1 Thessalonians passage in tandem with Genesis 2:7, which says in the American Standard Version:

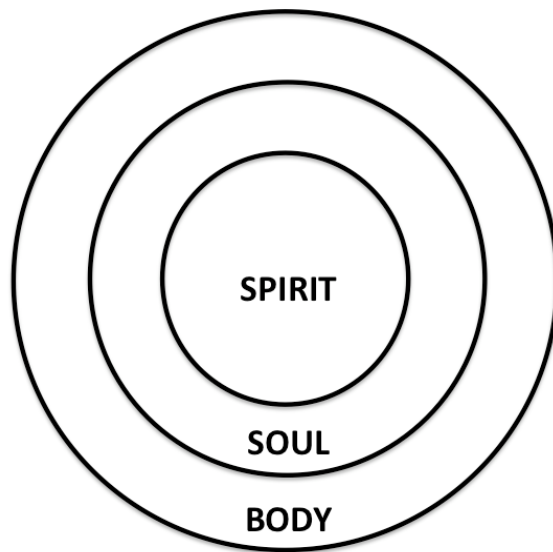
And Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

In explaining this Genesis passage, the preacher taught that forming man of the ground was forming the “body,” while the Hebrew for “breath” was the same as the Hebrew for “spirit.” Therefore, he informed us, we have in Genesis 2:7 an Old Testament verification of Paul's teaching that man was made up of three parts, “body” from “dust,” “spirit” or “breath” from God's own Spirit or Breath, and a soul.

After teaching this background concept, the preacher moved on to explain that man's actions in the garden resulted in the “death” of man, but that the core death was a “spiritual” one. “Man died in his spirit,” we were told, and the salvation story was one that offered new life “in the spirit” as the Spirit of God descended into the believers on Pentecost.

The goal for the believer was to learn to live in the spirit and from the spirit, rather than from the body, which was still reeling from the fall and had not yet been restored as had occurred to the spirit.

The preacher set out a picture to illustrate his point:



This picture was meant to illustrate that the “body” was the outer shell, the “spirit” was the inner man, and the “soul” was the meeting place between the two. The man who lived from the “body” was following the dictates of the “flesh” with all the negative ramifications of Paul’s use of the term. Our goal, he explained, was to crucify the flesh and live by the unseen spirit.

I loved this teaching. I loved the way it took the two verses and plugged them into each other. I loved the way it made the two verses complimentary bookends that seemed to fit perfectly as two puzzle pieces. I have always had affection for words and word play, and this approach not only did that, but it also did it in a way that was fresh and in a way I had not heard before.

Over the next decade (and actually beyond), I tried to live out this doctrine. I searched inside me for the voice of the “spirit.” I tried to recognize and put into perspective the dictates of the “body.” I read books and books on “spiritual warfare” which used this same approach to offer the believer victory over sin.

At one point while I was in law school, I set out to teach this same lesson to 100 college students in a Wednesday night class series I was teaching under the ministry of Charles Mickey (an editor and advisor to these lessons, and occasionally a substitute teacher for me in this class!). I sat with Charles in his office and laid out this idea waiting to hear his excitement and encouragement.

Charles, in his polite and godly way, did not squash my excitement nor stomp on my idea. He gently said to me, “You know, it is not quite as simple as you have set it out. You might want to reconsider some of this before you teach it.” I probed him a bit, and he pulled out a book by Robert Jewett entitled, “Paul’s Anthropological Terms” and suggested I borrow it and read it.

I tried. It was a tough, TOUGH read! I had finished an undergraduate degree in Biblical Languages and felt I had the background necessary to read and understand the work, but it was still like running in chest-high water – lots of energy to move very slowly!

The book did indeed teach me that the Bible did not really lay things out as clearly and in the manner in which I understood it. I shelved the idea of teaching that class and have left it on the shelf until today,¹ which brings us to this lesson.

Today, I finally teach the class, but do so in a different manner and from a much different perspective. After the last multiple classes on the terms Paul uses for the person (what we have called “Paul’s anthropological terms” using a phrase from Jewett and others), we are in a much better position to understand the complexity of the problem.

So, the thrust of this class is built around answering the question:

What is man?

To answer this question requires us to consider the nature of Scripture and how we study and understand it. It also requires a bit of review of past lessons and the reader is encouraged to download any of those lessons from the class website.²

We can consider three different groups of people considering this lesson: (1) Those who have never considered this question or teaching; (2) Those who ascribe to the teaching on spirit/soul/body (the “tri-partite man”); and (3) Those who reject the idea of tri-partite man. To those in category one, let me say that this study should help you identify and understand the biblical teaching of “who” you really are in ways that help you understand daily life before the Lord. To those of you in category two, I do not intend this lesson to be offensive. I have many, many dear friends who teach and believe accordingly. In fact, I still list that preacher from over 30 years ago as one of my all-time favorite preachers. To those who are in category three, I have joined your ranks!

SCRIPTURE, MATH, AND CONTEXT

I always liked math. It just seemed really logical to me, and I observed a certain beauty in that logic. I clearly remember learning the lessons of the substitution

¹ I am sure over the last 30 years I have taught some of the same concepts. Because I had them in my theology, they would find themselves expressed in my lessons, even though I do not recall them as the full subject of any teaching.

² Go to www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

property. It is the principle that if a and b are the same, then adding c to either number will get the same answer. In other words, if:

$$a = b, \text{ then } a + c \text{ will be the same as } b + c.$$

Some of us like to take this same mathematic property and apply it to Scripture. As we do so, we are assuming that the use of one word in one place carries the same meaning as the use of the same word in another place. It allows us to string together passages, regardless of their immediate context, and come up with teachings, doctrines, and theologies.

An example of this mathematical approach to scriptural interpretation might be a chain of verses on “love” as follows:

Beloved, let us **love** one another, for **love** is from God, and whoever **loves** has been born of God and knows God (1 Jn 4:7).

And this commandment we have from him: whoever **loves** God must also **love** his brother (1 Jn 4:21).

We **love** because he first **loved** us (1 Jn 4:19).

Greater **love** has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends (Jn 15:13).

We can easily move among those verses and see the chain of thought and equal usage of the word “love” plugging one verse into another. Here, the substitution principle of math works quite well.

In other places, however, it is not so simple. For example, consider these two verses:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire (James 1:13-14).

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Mt 4:1).

Does the substitution principle work here? Shall we say that God tempts no one, yet the Spirit led Jesus to be tempted? Must we conclude that the Spirit is not God? Similarly, shall we say that since “God cannot be tempted with evil” and yet Jesus was “tempted” that Jesus must not be God? Or, since a “person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire” that Jesus had such luring and desires?

The answer, we suggest, is one that does not treat the Bible as a mathematics book. The Bible is the inspired and reverent Word of God, but it is far beyond a book of ninth grade algebra. In the Bible, God has, through his Holy Spirit, inspired and worked through the writings of numerous people to produce His testimony and message. The Bible is a whole message, but it is also a collection of writings from the pens of people whose lives spanned over 1,000 years. In the midst of God's one Spirit inspiring and breathing our Bibles into existence, we still have these composite parts that make sense when read in context. By context, I am referring to both the literary context and the historical context.

We cannot fairly understand the Bible unless we come to it on its terms, rather than ours. The Bible is to be read first in context, both literary and historical, before any "chain reaction" can fairly result.

For example, the context of the John/1 John passages easily lends those passages to a relationship and common understanding, but the passages from James and Matthew do not. Context trumps mathematics in understanding Scripture.

This is one reason it is helpful to understand Scripture by studying Paul as an entity unto himself (what we have been doing for the last two years in this class). It allows us to focus on the context of Paul's peculiar usages of certain words, phrases, and ideas. We learned, for example, that Paul is the only Biblical writer to use the term "body of Christ" for the Church. No doubt Paul came to this clear revelation when his persecutions of the **church** brought the reproach of Christ on the Damascus road, "Why are you persecuting **me**?"

We see this need for context over math especially clearly in the area of Paul's anthropological terms. Take, for example, the term "body" (*soma*). We learned in a previous lesson (lesson 39³) that Paul used the word in a number of ways: physical parts of a person, the whole person (physical and "non-physical"), and as we referenced earlier, a description of the church. We cannot fairly take one of Paul's passages on the body and substitute it in for another! Consider these two usages:

But if Christ is in you, although the **body** (*soma*) is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness (Rom. 8:10).

For in him [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells **bodily** (*soma*) (Col. 2:9).

Should we conclude from those passages that the fullness of God dwelt within a body that was dead because of sin? Or, shall we conclude that the church as the "body" of Christ is dead because of sin? Of course not.

³ Downloadable at the website www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

A review of our lessons on Paul's specific usage of the terms "body," "flesh," "spirit," "heart," and "soul" all show that Paul had no real definitive boundaries of each word that separated one from all the others. In fact, Paul used each one of the words, at times, for the whole, entire person!

For Paul, the underlying current was the unity of man. Man was not divided into clear parts, like Greek thought provided. Man was, in the Old Testament and Jewish heritage sense, a unity.

That said, Paul was still able to use the different terms to emphasize different points or aspects of a person and one's situation, but it was never done in a way that gave clear divisions to one's make up. Certainly, there is no room for the three concentric circles with the idea that there are three distinct parts of man.

The only passage that Paul has that seems to substantiate a tri-partite man is the 1 Thessalonians 5:23 passage noted in the introduction to this lesson. Let us reconsider that passage:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One can certainly read that to mean that the complete man is tri-partite (three parts): spirit, soul, and body, yet that is certainly not the only way to read it. Perhaps, reading it that way even loses some of what Paul is saying (or at least, losing some of Paul's emphasis).

While some might read this passage as affirming three parts to a person, we should remember that in other places, Paul writes as if the person is two parts ("body and spirit" in 1 Cor. 7:34). The alternative to seeing this as three parts to a person is seeing it as a threefold description of how completely Paul wants the Thessalonians sanctified. In this sense, Paul is saying in multiple ways that the believer is to be sanctified wholly, not unlike Paul's thrice repeated emphasis in Colossians 3:17 that:

And **whatever** you do, in **word or deed**, do **everything** in the name of the Lord Jesus.

We see a similar triple emphasis in the well-known passage from Deuteronomy 6:5:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

The Deuteronomy passage means to love God with everything we are. We see this more clearly as we consider the way Jesus quotes the passage, because he expands the three areas into four! In Mark 12:30 we read:

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your **mind** and with all your strength.

The Scriptures are not here suggesting you are three parts (Deuteronomy) or four (Jesus in Mark). The Scriptures are saying that we bring everything to bear in our relationship to God!

This is the understanding a number of scholars give to our passage in 1 Thess. 5:23. Consider Wheaton professor Gene Green in his commentary:

We should not, however, simply conclude that Paul was falling out on the side of those who embraced the tripartite view... While these terms may describe different *aspects* of a human's nature, in the present context the apostle's appeal to God is simply that his sanctification may extend to the *entirety* of their being.⁴

Greek scholar Charles Wanamaker concludes similarly:

The most debated problem of the verse involves the juxtaposition of "spirit and soul and body," which appears to presuppose a tripartite view of human nature not found elsewhere in Paul, or for that matter in the rest of the NT... Paul's intention was not to offer an anthropological definition. Rather he sought to emphasize his desire that God would preserve his readers as complete human beings, blameless in the impending judgment of the day of the Lord."⁵

Well-known Australian scholar Leon Morris affirms:

Some interpreters see the reference to spirit, soul, and body as an indication that humans are threefold... But this is probably to press the language beyond what is warranted. Paul is not at this point giving a theoretical description of the nature of the human constitution, but engaging in prayer. We can no more take his words here to mean that our nature is threefold than we can take some of his words elsewhere to indicate that we are twofold (body and spirit, 1 Cor. 7:34), or those of Jesus in Mark 12:30 to show that we are

⁴ Green, Gene L., *The Letters to the Thessalonians (The Pillar New Testament Commentary)* (Eerdmans 2002) at 268-269.

⁵ Wanamaker, Charles A., *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans 1990) at 206-207.

fourfold (heart, soul, mind, and strength). Paul simply uses this graphic form by way of insisting that the whole person, and not some part only, is involved. All of our powers of whatever sort are to be sanctified, entirely set apart for God.⁶

In light of this, we now turn to ask what the Bible teaches in response to the question, “What is man?”

WHAT IS MAN?

Scripture asks this very question (albeit, not in the context of our psychological discussions of composite parts!) Psalm 8 reads:

O LORD, our Lord,
How majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouth of babies and infants,
You have established strength because of your foes,
To still the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
*What is man that you are mindful of him,
And the son of man that you care for him?*

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
And crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also
the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the
sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Who are we? The Majestic Lord, made every human being, each one of us, as a wonderful creation, crowned with glory and honor. He made us to be in relationship with the Creator himself. We have multiple aspects to ourselves, just as we have multiple limbs, but we are each a unity, made by God to walk with him in fellowship and love.

⁶ Morris, Leon, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Eerdmans 1991) at 181-182.

We create for ourselves a dangerous situation when we seek to divide our natures into constitutive parts that have various roles. The idea that we can isolate the body from the soul and the spirit can lead to frustration as we try to give direction to ourselves.

The biblical teaching of man as a composite whole calls the entire person into fellowship with God. The emphasis on “who we are” biblically is an emphasis on who we are made to be! It is an emphasis on *relationship*, not simply psychological breakdown and categorization. Jesus made this emphasis clear:

And this is eternal life, *that they know you* the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (Jn 17:3).

The death of Christ was not to rectify the idea of mankind’s need for a pure spirit to resolve the issue created by “spiritual death” in Eden. The death of Christ was to restore a broken relationship – man with his Creator.

The indwelling Spirit is not a new composite part that will lead to conquering the sinful body. It is the sign and seal of a relationship restored – of a relationship set now for eternity.

The soul is not some amalgam of where the spirit meets the body. It is the human creation, meant for fellowship with God, but one out of fellowship until the victorious Christ enters and brings victory over the fall and death.

Why then do we have these separate terms? Are they of no use to us? Of course, they are of use! The terms can be used in different passages at different times to bring about certain emphases given by the passages. But as we read them, we must not do so blindly assuming the mathematic principle of substitution will work. We should strive to understand the passages in context. We can then find the emphasis being taught.

When we put this together, we have a clear biblical picture of man made by God. Man fallen in her/his entirety (what we call in our modern parlance body, flesh, mind, thoughts, emotions, heart, drive, will, self-control, soul, spirit, conscience, inner being, outer being, *etc.*) We are fully fallen. Christ has come and given a sacrificial redemption, however. That redemption is as full as the fall. While the current body still reflects the frailties and disease of the fall, the promise and covenant of the Spirit is that one day even the physical body will be changed to a glorified one!

The answer to the question, “What is man?” is found in relationship, not in constitutive parts!

DOES THIS MATTER?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, Charles Mickey, a key figure on my journey to these conclusions is a reader and commenter on these lessons. I sent him a copy of this lesson and received his notes in reply. I will enclose those notes here to indicate where he is, after the thirty years since we last discussed me teaching on this:

Mark,

I enjoyed your "stunning" conclusion! You had me curious about being in the lesson, but thanks for being complimentary about my tiny role in your learning about these matters. Isn't it often the case that what someone taught us as simple turns out to need more study, time, experience and especially wisdom?

I don't have much to add, except that I think it might be important to mention that much of what Paul opposed in the early heresies (e.g. Colossian, Corinthian, *et al.*) had roots in the Greek thinking about man and his parts. One branch of Gnosticism taught that you could do anything you wanted to with your body because it was the spirit/soul that would be set free at death, not the body...Libertinism. Asceticism, it seems to me, is largely based in the same roots. The body and all its fleshy desires need to be whipped into servitude. Such thinking even led many over the centuries (especially among Roman Catholics) to think that everything sexual was evil, as if God didn't think of sexual relations before he made man/woman and ordain such pleasure and productivity for marriage. I'd like your class to know the dangerous consequences of thinking of man in such a segmented way. So very many today justify immorality of all kinds (e.g., David Letterman announcing his adulteries/fornications to the applause of his audience!!!) if they just take care of the spiritual matters separately. For many, that's just showing up in a church bldg. on Easter and Christmas, having your baby baptized, etc. You get the idea. All your points are excellent. I would just remind the class of some of the false teaching Paul tried to correct in various letters. (You could even throw in a little I John, if you wanted to.) And, I would try to bring it home to here and now to show how easy such dissection of man feeds our own justification of sin.

Amen, Charles! I could not have said it any better!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ (Gen. 1:26)*

God did not haphazardly make you or me. We are not simply a convenient intersection of genes from a mother and father. We all were made for a specific purpose, to be in fellowship with our Creator. This is the same LORD God who walked in the garden seeking to talk and fellowship with Adam and Eve. This is the same LORD God who loved us enough to send his Son to “be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn 3:14-15). Do not approach your day or night, your job or your family, your thoughts or emotions, as one who randomly exists on this planet. Know that you are God’s. You were made for his purposes, and first and foremost of these purposes is to know him and his Son.

2. *“Whatever, you do, work **heartily** (psuche/soul), as for the Lord and not for men” (Col 3:23).*

Here, we repeat the point for home from last week with an added emphasis on relationship. When we consider the lives we lead on this earth, we see the perspective of living in relationship with God. That means we are not here to just be what God has made us to be, nor do what God has made us to do. We are here to do God’s will in conjunction and fellowship with him! This is true for all things we do, whether the world deems them “spiritual” or “physical.” For the believer, they are all the same. They are our opportunities to live and work in fellowship with our God. We do nothing alone!

3. *“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23).*

Because of our relationship with the Creator, we seek to set aside all that we are whatever terms we wish to use, for him. We are not relating to him only in spirit. We relate to him as his people, as his children. So, all of us should be set aside for him in purity for eternity! Amen, come soon Lord Jesus!