

## To Take the Soul to Task

by David Powlison

**I**t were an easy thing to be a Christian, if religion stood only in a few outward works and duties,  
But to take the soul to task,  
and to deal roundly with our own hearts,  
and to let conscience have its full work,  
and to bring the soul into spiritual subjection unto God,  
This is not so easy a matter,  
because the soul out of self-love is loath to enter into itself,  
lest it should have other thoughts of itself than it would have.

—Richard Sibbes<sup>1</sup>

Sobering words, aren't they? Sibbes gets first things first. Jesus' amazing grace comes to sinners with everything needed to create children of glory. But the soul out of self-love resists the central activity of the Christian life: change. What gets in the way of living reliant on Christ's comfort and love? Of loving God with all that you are? Of looking out for the interests of others? Something in you doesn't want to be seen for what it is. Yet the power and instruction of the Word and Spirit intend to remake you. God willingly and persistently will teach you to love, fear, trust, and serve Him.

The Bible calls this change by many names. Jesus says, "Become a disciple." A disciple self-consciously engages in becoming different. Jesus says, "Follow me." Follower, deny yourself, taking up your cross daily. Jesus says, "First take the log out of your own eye." Lightened of sin, you will

treat other people very differently. The apostle John says, "Those who have this hope [of becoming like Jesus] purify themselves as He is pure." Paul says, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind," that you might live out God's perfect will. Solomon says "fool" to a person set in his ways, who trusts his own instincts and opinions, who is uncorrectable. He says "wise" to a person who is fundamentally correctable: reprove a wise man and he will love you and become wiser.

John Calvin once described the Christian life as a lifelong "race of repentance."<sup>2</sup> J. C. Ryle said that a vital Christian enters into a lifelong quarrel with himself: "He and sin must quarrel, if he and God are to be friends."<sup>3</sup> The quotation from Richard Sibbes says it well. To take the soul to task is the way of life, but we resist the light about ourselves. To deal roundly with yourself is the hard way, the narrow way,...the good way. Perhaps I should say it more strongly. It is the brutally wonderful, painstakingly delightful way.

How is it delightful? War with self comes paired with the peace of God that passes all understanding. Those who acknowledge folly find wisdom. Get wisdom; *nothing* you could possibly desire compares with her. The price is high: yourself. The reward staggers: God Himself.

You counsel two kinds of people in principle. One kind will hear what Sibbes says. Some of these hear immediately. Jesus, whom they love because He first loved them, can have His say and His way. They possess hearing ears and a softened heart, to the praise of His glorious grace. They are immediately teachable. Others hear more gradually. They may temporarily kick and buck, sticking their fingers in their ears. But sooner or later they, too, listen. Even as they point a

<sup>1</sup>Richard Sibbes (1577-1635) was a Puritan pastor. Quotation is from *The Soul's Conflict, and Victory Over Itself by Faith*, XV:vii:6, in *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, Vol. 1, (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862), page 200.

<sup>2</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III:iii:9, in John McNeil, ed., *Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XX, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), page 602.

<sup>3</sup>J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (London: James Clark, 1952), page 70.

bitter, blame-shifting finger at others or God, even as they nurse narcotic self-pity, they listen to truth's re-proof. Their hearing improves; their hearts soften. They prove teachable. Whether sooner or later this first kind of person is willing to deal roundly with his own heart and come under subjection to God. This kind of person changes in the direction Jesus intends.

The other kind of person will not hear what Sibbes says. Perhaps they view God as "the errand boy to satisfy [their] wandering desires."<sup>4</sup> Some crave to think well of themselves. They resist and become angry when God insists we glorify Him and refuses to serve the lust for self-esteem. Such people don't want Jesus to be executed in their place, that He might cause them to live no longer for themselves. They want to be intrinsically okay. Others crave love or acceptance or money or success or fame or power or importance or significance or good health or marriage or children or comfort or excitement or food or pleasure or independence...or all of the above. They are angry that God would even think to yank them off the hierarchy of needs in order to "break [their] schemes for earthly joy."<sup>5</sup> This second kind of person is fundamentally unteachable and will not change in the direction Jesus intends.

Start with yourself. Taste and see that the Lord is good, that the wisdom He gives contains freedom, life, riches, purpose, and joy rolled into one. Take your soul to task. Like Isaiah you will then have purified lips to bring both the hard words and the sweet words to others, who also need to let conscience have its full work.

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This issue of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* ranges widely, over varied terrain. Ed Welch's "Exalting Pain? Ignoring Pain?" tackles the problem of suffering, misery, and woe. People suffer. Face-to-face ministry continually looks into the faces and hears the voices of suffering people. How do you help sufferers with the grace of Christ?

Stephen Vantassel looks at singleness, a frequent occasion for either misery or self-indulgence, and redeems it. "Celibacy: The Forgotten Gift of the Holy Spirit" lays out a perspective and a plan to help Christians understand one of God's little-appreciated gifts.

"Watch Your Language!" by Brad Beevers offers practical help on the tongue. He unpacks specific ways daily speech tends to neuter God's point of view on life. Biblical counseling has always been interested in the

particulars of language. Language communicates meanings, and meanings either lead or mislead both speaker and hearer. Like Vantassel, Beevers has written for counselees as well as counselors.

Leslie Vernick's "Getting to the Heart of the Matter in Marriage Counseling" opens a window on the decisions counselors make in the heat of the counseling moment. Counseling—like friendship and parenting—is much less scripted than most preaching and teaching. But biblical truths and goals must inform the minute-to-minute decisions that counselors make when people talk about their problems.

For our preaching section we present the first of a three-part series, Tim Keller's "Model for Preaching." Keller lays out an overall model of effective communication and deals with the centrality of authoritative Scripture. Future installments will deal with adaptation to the audience and with the person of the preacher. Non-preachers will find Keller's presentation filled with implications for counseling.

Elyse Fitzpatrick reviews *The All-New Free to be Thin* by Neva Coyle and Marie Chapian. This is a new edition of a fifteen-year-old best seller on dieting and eating problems.

A new section debuts in this issue, "Queries & Controversies." Sometimes you will find pithy answers to commonly asked questions. Sometimes you will find reasoned discussion of a criticism someone has made of biblical counseling. Sometimes you will find debate, two points of view on a vexed topic. Different authors will contribute, but I'll inaugurate it by answering a common query: "Is the term unconditional love a good way to talk about God's love?"

<sup>4</sup>From Bob Dylan's "When You Gonna Wake Up?," in *Slow Train Coming*, 1979.

<sup>5</sup>From John Newton's hymn that begins "I Asked the Lord" (sometimes titled, "These Inward Trials").