

## Agents of Growth: What SoulCare Can Do in Our Lives



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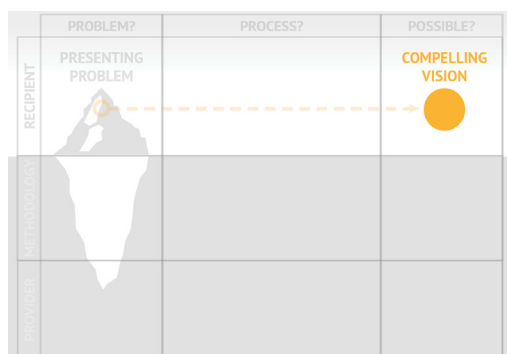
### SoulCare

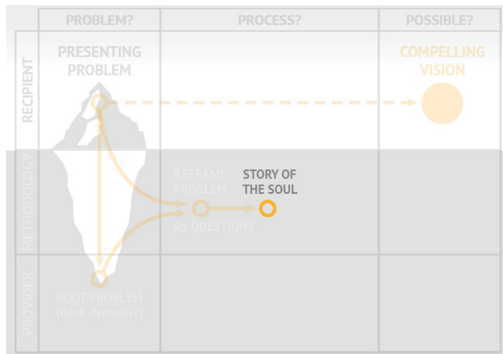
is not a technique to master. It is a relationship to offer.

Let me tell you the great danger in learning SoulCare from a chart. The temptation will be that you are going to reduce SoulCare to a chart. The basic strategy I am sketching is not meant to be a precise formula by any means for how to move into somebody's life. I am offering this really as a loose guide for you as you enter someone's soul with a desire to see their appetite for Christ become their ruling passion. And all this chart, material, and all of the thinking that we are doing now is meant to be nothing more than that—an opportunity for the Spirit to move through your intelligent movements into somebody else's life. Remember the very first point that I made as the course began that SoulCare is not a technique to master—it is a relationship to offer.

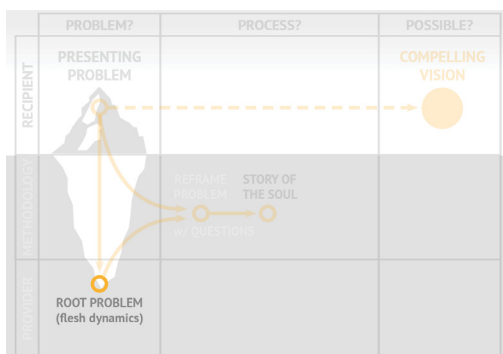
So what I want to encourage you to do, as we have come to the last lesson in this particular course, is I want you to maybe put your pen down just a little bit for a moment. I want you to sit back in your chair with a mood not of, "I've got to get it all," but with a mood of, "Let me ponder what is being said ... let me become aware of what is stirring within me rather than getting the teaching so I can go out and do it. Let me just become a different kind of a person, as I ponder these thoughts about how to move into somebody else's life."

So far, we have covered the top half, essentially, of our chart. We have talked about the presenting problem, and we have suggested that the very first thing that you must do with the presenting problem is to think "vision." When you think "vision," it creates a space in your soul for the Spirit of God to speak. As you think "vision," and become attentive to the Spirit speaking within you, then secondly, [become curious]. I talked last time about becoming very curious, about wanting to know all that is involved in this presenting problem and just asking many respectful questions, with the energy not of judgment or analysis, but with the energy of just plain curiosity, plain respect. And then as the presenting problem gets talked about, then we suggested that you want to





reframe the problem into the story of a soul, to encourage people to begin talking about their relationships, because that is what the story of life is all about. If we are relational beings made in the image of God, then the story of a soul is really the story of relationships, so reframing questions get us to talk about the story of the soul. And now as the person talks about their relationships, their present relationships—husband, wife, children, friends, their past relationships, particularly parents of course, their present-immediate relationship with you at the moment that you are chatting, and their deepest relationship with God—as they begin talking about that, now the work of SoulCare really begins. Now you listen. And you listen with the intent of knowing, exploring, discovering, and touching. In order to do that well, the bottom half of the chart needs to come into play. So let us start talking about that.



**Not an innocent self  
damaged by a difficult  
environment...**

Let us start talking about the way a SoulCarer thinks about the difficulties as somebody shares the problem. Way down, the root problem, flesh dynamics, this category is not something that I am encouraging you to understand in a way that you can pin a label on somebody and figure somebody out, but it is a way of sitting back, and with the guidance of the Spirit, open to the Spirit's leading as you think about what this person could become. It is way of thinking about what is going on in the deepest part of this person's soul, in the part that is a mess and the part that is just full of the flesh and the part that reflects their image-bearing fallenness, not their image-bearing redemption. What is going on, as you start thinking about the root cause, what really is behind their presenting problem? What I want to suggest to you is at this point SoulCare, many other points as well, but at this point particularly, that SoulCare parts company dramatically with secular psychotherapy. We are going to be talking about the root problem, not in terms of thinking of a damaged self, which is the way that therapy often thinks about what is going on—somebody is hurting, they were damaged by a bad event, and the therapist has to come up with an understanding of that, and repair it in some way—we are not going to be thinking about what it means to be a damaged self—that is psychotherapy, which I believe at this level is illegitimate. We are going to be thinking rather about SoulCare, which focuses on a stubborn soul, as opposed to a damaged self, a stubborn soul with incredible potential, but still the problem has to do with stubbornness more than with damage. I want to explain that. I want to make that as clear as I can.

In secular therapy, the assumption is made, in all of secular

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**but rather a stubborn soul  
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without God.**

psychology, there is an assumption that is made that I believe is at exact variance with the biblical worldview. The assumption is this: that this little baby that is born that now at age two or three or four begins to experience the harshness of the world—of a parent who rejects, of a parent who loses temper, of an alcoholic parent who beats, of a perverted parent who is involved in sexual abuse—as this little child begins to experience all of the good things, as well as all of these bad things that I have mentioned, the assumption is made that that child can best be understood as an innocent self. And as an innocent self with no moral direction that is bad whatsoever, all they are wanting to do—all this cute little girl, this cute boy wants to do—is come alive with who they are as a cute little boy or cute little girl. But their environment hems them in, and keeps them from becoming all that they can be, so we think more in terms of the innocent self that has been damaged by a difficult environment. And just as a physician would treat a person who has been damaged by an assailant, who plunged the knife into the arm, the surgeon now says, “You are an innocent victim. My job is to suture up your arm where the knife of the assailant went in,” the secular therapist thinks similarly and says, “We have an innocent self that has been damaged, and my job is to restore the fullness of self so you are released to be all that you can be.” That is the view of secular therapy.

Now, contrast that with the very different understanding that I believe is at the root of SoulCare. SoulCare assumes that there is no such thing as an innocent self, and that is a theological statement—that every child born into this world, except for Jesus, has been born with a fatal disease, a moral disease. Every child born into this world is an image-bearing—and that gives that child his or her dignity and value—but an image-bearing, depraved soul. Now we have the concepts of dignity and depravity. We have this little child who is now the adult sitting in front of you and your relationship of SoulCare, and you are thinking about this person, not as an innocent self who has been damaged, and you have got to fix something by going beneath the surface and seeing where the damage is; but you are thinking now in terms of this person as a stubborn soul who is looking at the realities of life and finding some way to keep themselves intact, to keep themselves preserved—feeling good about themselves, somewhat happy, whole, able to function, to take care of themselves in the face of a difficult world—and they are taking responsibility for that and what they are saying is, “God is not relevant to this process whatsoever.” And that is the depravity. God is not someone to trust.

## The Flesh

the determination to make my life work without trusting God

Tell me some little five-year-old girl, who in the middle of the sexual abuse, naturally says, “God is with me.” It does not happen. Why does it not happen? Fundamentally, it does not happen, because that little girl has no relationship with God. She has been cut off from God by her own depravity, and something in her is saying, “Whatever is happening in life, I have got to handle it on my own, because there is nobody out there for me.” God has been cut off from her life, from his life, from all of their lives.

Let me give you a simple definition of what the Bible calls the flesh. All I am talking about is the flesh as the root problem beneath all of our presenting problems. And the Bible talks about no longer living in the energy of the flesh, and mortify the flesh, do violence to the flesh, kill the flesh. What is the Bible talking about? The flesh can be defined most simply as the determination to make my life work without ever trusting God. Flesh can be most simply defined as a determination to make my life work—as a seven-year-old boy with an alcoholic father, as a ten-year-old girl with a neighbor who seduces her—“I am going to find some way to make my life work. That hurt a lot. I don’t like what happened to me. It was wrong. I am the victim. It should not have happened. There has been damage done to me, of course, but my core determination is, I am going to find some way to make my life work, and it is not going to include God.”

So when a father neglects his son or when a little girl is abused, the essential point that I am making is that there is no such thing as an innocent self; that has been damaged. What there is, is an image-bearer. There is a cute little girl that is being treated very wickedly and despicably in a way she never should have been treated; and her pain is real, and her pain is legitimate, and our mood should be one of profound empathy and rescuing her from that awful situation, if it is at all possible. All that, of course. But go beyond that to recognizing that in each of us who has been harmed by relational events in our worlds that have not been as they should be, in each of us, there is something, there is an energy within us that reflects our fallenness that says, “I am going to make a determined attempt, I am going to be determined in my effort to find a way to make my life work, and it is not going to include trusting God. The world is not working for me. I am going to find resources within me to get my needs met that I can control.”

Recall the concepts from an earlier lesson of self-need (I am the point, my needs are the point), and self-management (I am going

$$\begin{array}{c}
 \text{Life Experiences} \\
 \text{(good or bad)} \\
 \times \\
 \text{Fleshly Energy} \\
 = \\
 \text{Flesh Dynamics}
 \end{array}$$

to make my life work). That is the issue. Those are the issues that are beneath all of these presenting problems that we have in our world. Therefore, we can put it simply this way: that life experiences, whether it is a wonderful mom and dad, or a bad mom and dad, or somewhere in between, life experiences x fleshly energy (the determination to make life work without God) = flesh dynamics—i.e., the strategies that I have come up with to make my life work, so that if God does not come through, I am just fine. I do not really need Him, because I am intact without Him.

I want to illustrate that personally for just a moment. If we are going to understand flesh dynamics, if we are going to realize that we are up against a problem that we cannot solve, if we are going to realize that the problem that we are up against is so big, and so bad, and so deep, and so awful, that nothing has the power to deal with this except the Gospel of Jesus Christ, if we are going to realize that SoulCare depends on what Jesus does in our lives—it is not something that we pull off—if we are going to realize how big and bad these flesh dynamics are, then maybe it will be helpful to put some illustration to the concepts that I am talking about.

And, again just very briefly, I am a fifty-six-year-old man who has two parents who are both living. Dad is eighty-eight, and Mother is eighty-four. Mother is living in an Alzheimer's unit, and Dad is living, in an apartment close by to where Mother is, by himself. He is very lonely. And this is an enormous struggle, of course, for them, obviously. And it is a struggle for me. And you want to provide SoulCare for me. You want to move into my life as a man who is struggling, and this is a very present struggle that I am in the middle of experiencing, even as I share with you. Suppose you were to ask some questions out of curiosity, out of respectful, loving curiosity. And you say, "Well, Larry, tell me more about your mom and dad, and tell me what kind of struggles are going on with you." I would share things along this line. I would say to you that I am very grateful for Mother and Dad. They are godly, Christian people. And I could enumerate the blessings that they have brought into my life that are very strong and very considerable, and I think that I am blessed more than many people that I chat with, and I mean that very sincerely. And yet, and everybody can say "and yet ..." because nobody has perfect parents. Nobody has a perfect friend except God. And if in our flesh, we turn to some source other than God, we are always going to experience profound soul-smothering disappointments. What I would say to you is my mother is a woman who is more matter-of-fact than affectionate. And just recently, as I walked away from her after



visiting with her and left the room, she had a moment of lucidity and emotion. She grabbed me and kissed me on the lips and said, “Thanks for everything”—that happened just recently. It is the first time that she has ever kissed me that I can recall. I wonder what that did to me? Am I a damaged self, or am I a stubborn soul? And then, [there is] Dad. Dad has had to overcome a variety of disadvantages throughout his entire life that, for whatever reason, has made me look on him as a bit of a needy person that I have to take care of. What has that done to me?

That is a thumbnail sketch, obviously, incredibly brief, about my relational story of my soul. What is that like for me? How will you care for my soul? How will you move into my life? What are the flesh dynamics that are going on? Am I a stubborn soul who longs for more affection and strength in somebody else’s life toward me, which I think is legitimate to want? But then do I see that as a need in myself that you had better take care of, and then in my self-managing ways I go about looking for ways to get people to respond to me in ways that I have not been responded to by Mom and Dad? Is that the way that you would begin to understand me? I think if you were to think like that, you would be on to something. Because that is more of who I am, more of a stubborn soul than a damaged self who needs your sympathy.

As you listen to someone talk about their life—as you listen to someone share about the first time they were kissed by their mother, after fifty-some years of being alive; and a father who, with all of his good points, still has a certain neediness that calls something out of me to take care of him that I do not think is holy—as you listen to somebody’s life, how do you start thinking? You have this category in your mind of flesh dynamics, and you realize that there is something ugly and wicked and bad inside of each of us, and we have to use terms like that. Many years ago I asked the question, “Whatever happened to sin, whatever became of evil, why do we not have that diagnostic category, if you will, in our mind as we think about problems?” Is there not something fundamentally, morally wrong with us? And then as you think like that and encourage me to tell my story, and encourage your friends to tell their story, then what kind of categories do you have for reflecting upon their story?

I want to suggest this very simply. There is so much to this that we will look at much later, but for now, I want you to think about the notion that there are some basic categories that I have already stated that I want to review for you very simply and

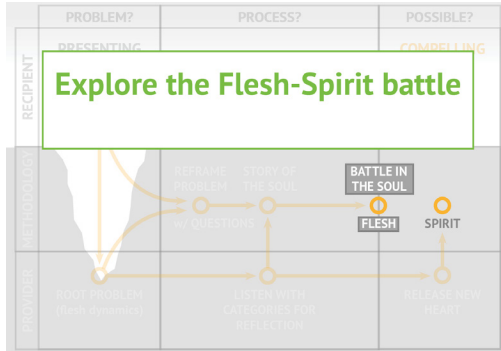
**Basic SoulCare Categories:**

- disappointed image-bearer who longs for relationship
- demanding person who feels justified
- redeemed person with a vital appetite for God

those are these: As people tell their story, think about the fact that you are listening to an image-bearer tell his or her story. You are listening to a person who longs for a relationship that only God can provide; and therefore, every other relationship in their lives—the best husband, the best wife, the best kid, the best mom, the best dad—every other relationship, at some point, is disappointing. And as you tell me your story, I want to reflect on that. You are disappointed. You are hurting. You are an image-bearer who is not receiving what you were designed to receive from other people, and maybe you are not as aware of receiving it from God as you could be. You are an image-bearer who longs for certain things—that is a category for reflection, an image-bearer.

A second category is a category of fallenness. As I listen to you tell your story, I need to realize that you are a demanding person. There is something in you which is demanding that other people come through for you, and you feel justified in that. There is something insufferable about you, just like there is about me. We both stand in desperate need of God's forgiving grace. And as I listen to you tell your story, I realize that there is something very self-centered about you, very demanding about you, that really is neither good, nor changeable.

A third category is a category that we are going to look at in exciting detail later on, a category of the new covenant. We are image-bearers who long, we are fallen people who demand, but we are redeemed people, redeemed by the Gospel. And what that means is, not only that we are forgiven for all the ugliness, but we are actually changed. We are changed from the inside out. God has put a new heart inside of me, and now as I am providing you with SoulCare, and you tell me the story of your soul, as I listen to you talk, I am looking for the good stuff, beneath the bad. I am looking for the thirst in your soul, the appetite that you have that really is directed toward God, because that is there. It is not just a demand that you have a mother who is more affectionate. It is not just a demand that you have a father who, in certain ways, was stronger for you. But now you realize that of course you want that, but you have an appetite for God that is far deeper than those appetites. And when your appetite for God is recognized and realized and lived out, then those other appetites cease to become demands, and only become painful desires that really do not destroy you at all. The new covenant changes us in ways that lets me think about you when you tell the story of your soul with a great deal of hope, and I need to reflect on that. I need to listen to you carefully according to categories for reflection. And then

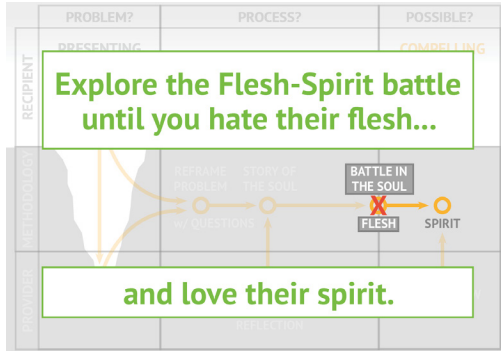


as I do that, maybe I will be able to, as the two of us chat, maybe we will collaborate together, and be able to come up to a clearer understanding of what is the battle going on in your soul. Maybe we can move from reflecting on the story of the soul, to entering the battle that is going on inside of you. What is the real battle that is happening inside of you between the flesh and the spirit?

Could I begin to understand what your unique battle is and leave aside the aloof-sounding theological terms, flesh and spirit, and bring it down to where you are living right now, when you get mad when the toilet overflows? What is the battle between the flesh and the spirit at the point of that trivial inconvenience? What is the battle between my flesh and my spirit, as I think about a mother who no longer recognizes me, and who has kissed me once in my life? What is the battle going on? Do not feel sorry for me. Do not give me sympathy. Explore me. Discover me. Understand the battle that is going on in my soul, and realize that as you begin to explore that battle—as I begin to explore that battle with you—as you begin to explore that battle with somebody else, we have a power.

There is a power within us that, when it is released from my heart, can actually engage this battle productively, and can join forces with the right side, with the side that has got to eventually win, but which needs to win now a little bit more as well. There is a power within me, that as you share your story, and I reflect, and the battle gets defined, and I begin to see how you are demanding that your wife respond to you in this way, and you are feeling very insecure because of your background, and I realize that all of those are your fleshly dynamics, but you have an appetite for God that is within you that really would love to bless this woman in the name of God, even when she lets you down—that is actually in you. Maybe my power that could be released from my heart into yours, includes at least two elements. One: How badly I hate your flesh, just like I hate my own. It is something that deserves to die. You do not kill unless you hate, and there is a hatred that is legitimate, a hatred of sin, a hatred of the fact that when I move toward my wife, sometimes I feel so justified in moving away from her, and not being kind to her because she let me down. That is worthy of hatred. And maybe, if that hatred within me toward my flesh as well as yours is felt by you—not as an angry judgment, but as a way of saying that is a part of you that is ruining your potential to live for God and your joy—maybe then that hatred coming out of me for the fleshly part of you will help you abandon that a bit, provided that something else comes out of me.





Do I just love your spirit? Do I just love, am I excited about, am I passionate about, what Jesus Christ has done in you, and can I see it? Have I discovered, as I have come to know and explore, now am I discovering what is alive within you? How would you talk to me, if you were releasing your heart toward me? I think that you might say something like this: “You know, you really are pretty demanding at times. You demand that you be enough for other people. You demand that you be sufficient to remove other people’s neediness, and I think it is because you finally want to get a break, and want to take a rest.” And I think that I would say, “Yeah, that is kind of what I do, I guess, that is not so good is it?” And your response would be, “No, I think it is ugly, and I don’t like it. And it hurts my friendship with you, actually.” And I think that something in me would agree. But then suppose that you were to go on to say, “But I know that there is a life within you that deeply cares about your mother, about your father, about your wife, a life that deeply wants to be a blessing to other people. Larry, I can see it in you, and I just got all excited about that. I celebrate that. I jump up and down that I see that. That is marvelous. I am so thrilled to have you for my buddy. I am really glad to have you for my friend.”

What would have happened if you were to do that, if you talked to me that way, if you released your spirit-led heart, if you released your curious heart that has a vision for who I could become, if you released the part of you that is energized by the love of Christ, and not the desire to help me and to make me better and to fix me up; but if you released all of the good stuff that is in you toward me in that way, something about my flesh would feel much less attractive to me. And something about the life of Christ that is in me would start to come alive a little more. It is already there because of the Spirit. You cannot put it there. But if you start invigorating that, then you are living out what the writer said in Hebrews 10:24: You have thought hard about how you can stimulate me to love and to good deeds, where the spirit becomes more alive in me because of the way you have interacted with me. If you did that for me, you would be a man or a woman who provided me with SoulCare. And I would be grateful. And I would be different because of the power of God through you in my life.

What we have after these ten lessons, are only the basic foundations of SoulCare. We have just gotten started in what we need to understand. We need to clearly grasp the problem that each of us has more deeply. We need to grasp who we are as image-bearers more fully. There will be other courses. We need to grasp



the Gospel that Jesus Christ has introduced into our lives, and the changes that it has made, and how we can capitalize on all of the resources, the provisions, of the Gospel. That will be a further course yet. And then I long that we begin to see that SoulCare could begin a revolution. There is a new way to live, and SoulCare can release it. We will be talking about all of that as time goes on.