

Introduction

One of my two favorite baseball players when I was a boy was Mickey Mantle. He wasn't much of a role model though. Thinking he was going to die young, Mantle grabbed for all the gusto he could get as we say it. He partied and caroused around, becoming an alcoholic in the process. Finally, in 1994, at the age of 63, he entered the Betty Ford Clinic, after which he was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver. That diagnosis then prompted him to famously declare, **"If I knew I was going to live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself."**

That's an instructive comment. Rightly understood, it teaches us what we need to do in order to live well, now and forever. We need to take care of ourselves and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Fallen

Genesis 3 describes the condition of the world and how it got that way. Adam and Eve sinned against God. God then confronted them with the consequences of that in verses 16-19. The first, in verse 16, was corporeal. Eve would have pain in childbirth. The second, also in verse 16, was relational. Eve would desire her husband and be ruled by him. **"To love and to cherish"** became **"to desire and to dominate,"** to quote Derek Kidner. The third, in verses 17-18, was natural. Nature would be untamed and encroaching, transforming work into toil. And finally, the fourth, in verse 19, was also corporeal. The bodies of all living creatures would decline, cease functioning, and become dust.

Those are just four of the countless consequences that sin caused. We describe the cumulative effect of those consequences by saying that the world and everything in it, including human beings and human life, are fallen. We are fallen creatures living in a fallen world.

Let's contrast that with the perfect creatures living in the perfect world of Eden. First, verse 16 implies there was no pain. Adam and Eve didn't have headaches or sore throats. Second, verse 16 also implies

there was no relational conflict. Adam and Eve didn't dominate, manipulate, or deceive each other. Third, verses 17-18 imply there was no toil. All of Adam and Eve's work was satisfying and pleasurable. And finally, verse 19 implies there was no death. The bodies of no living creatures declined and ceased functioning.

This contrast between the world before the Fall and after it helps us define, generally, what "**fallen**" means. There is a strong and constant downward pull on everything that exists, including human beings.

A physical law, the Second Law of Thermodynamics, illustrates this in the realm of matter. Simply put, it states that every system left to itself degenerates in three ways. It moves from an orderly state to a disorderly one; from a complex state to a simple one; and from a state of high energy potential to one of low energy potential. How many of you over 40 have less energy now than you did when you were 18? How many of you over 40 see less clearly now than you did when you were 18? You're experiencing the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Your body is declining, in other words, just as verse 19 said it would.

This downward pull of fallenness extends far beyond the realm of matter to all other realms as well including the political, financial, psychological, sociological, and spiritual. There's a strong and constant movement in all of those from a higher level of functioning to a lower level of functioning or even non-functioning; from a better state to a lesser state. Everything, in other words, is in a state of decline.

A Christian wife named Esther Irish wrote a short article about marriage. She states in it: "**A happy marriage does take work If it's not a conscious and active decision, things just start sliding on a downward spiral.**" Notice the terminology she used, "**sliding on a downward spiral,**" which is accurate. There is a strong and constant downward pull on marriages. Without "**work**" or what I'm calling "**care,**" they'll decline and die.

But it isn't just marriage. It's everything, tangible and intangible, including human beings. Everything is fallen and thus, declining.

Take Care of Things

That's a hard fact of life and we need to deal with it. We'll live poorly if we don't. We'll live well if we do. But how do we deal with it?

One of the defining events of life is the birth of our first baby, which raises the question, "**What in the world do we do now?**" A website article, "**How to (and not to) Take Care of a Baby,**" tells us with a series of cartoon slides I'll show you. My favorites are daddy "**lifting baby**" by the top of the head instead of behind the back and "**drying baby**" in the clothes dryer instead of with towel.

Babies do require care don't they, but so does everything else in this fallen world of ours including pets, cars, businesses, friendships, tomato plants, baseball gloves, office morale, marriages, and lawns to name a few. The very fallenness of those things necessitates care. Without it, the downward pull of that fallenness diminishes or even destroys them.

Care, therefore, is how we deal with fallenness. We take care of things. We do what's necessary to maintain or improve their functionality or state. We act in ways that develop them and make them better or if that can't be done, that preserve them. That's what it means, generally, to take care of things, which is how we deal with fallenness.

Take tomato plants, for instance. We plant them in a sunny place, fertilize them, protect them with a fence, support them, and water them.

Or take friendship. Nancy Nicolazzo, a "**life coach,**" writes that "**friendship takes work, but the work is worth it when the result is friendship.**" She goes on to identify the "**work**" that friendships takes: (1) Time and attention; (2) Listening; and (3) Giving and receiving.

Tomato plants and friendship illustrate how we deal with fallenness. We take care of things. We do what's necessary to preserve or to improve their functionality or state.

How to Care for Things

But how do we know what's necessary? I'll tell you. It's

understanding. Understanding is the basis of care.

Some years ago, Reader's Digest published the most successful series of articles in its history, with over seven million reprints. Written by J.D. Ratcliff they were titled, generally, *I'm Joe's Body*, and presented our organs talking to us. Each article had a similar title like "**Hi, I'm Joe's Liver**" (or skin or tongue or thyroid, and so on). It described the structure and properties of an organ and its function in the body. After that, it explained how to care for it so that it was healthy and functioned well. Notice Ratcliff's order: the structure and properties of the organ and then how to care for it. Grasp what that implies. To care for our organs, we must first of all understand their structure and properties.

But it isn't just organs. It's everything else as well. It's a million dollar insight. Understanding is the basis of care. What we would care for, we must first of all understand. I've explained before that everything has a nature and order, a structure and properties, that characterize it. To understand something means to know its nature and order, which in turn enables us to care for it. We're able to determine what taking care of it requires – to determine what is necessary to either preserve it or to improve it. We then do what is necessary.

Understanding something of course requires study. We bring it before our senses and minds to examine and analyze it. We give it deeper concentration and thought. We also pursue learning what people in the know say about it. Knowing its nature and order as a result, we also know what caring for it requires. We then do what is required.

We do, that is, if what is required is also deserved. That's always at issue isn't it? Once we know what caring for something requires, we must make a value judgment. Does it deserve the care it requires? Does the benefit or gain of it outweigh the cost or loss of caring for it? Are the benefits of tomato plants or friendship worth the effort that caring for them requires? If we determine that they are, we'll have tomatoes and friends. If we determine that they aren't, we won't. It's as simple as that.

Making right value judgments of course is essential to living well. Giving things more or less care than they deserve diminishes life. Giving them the care they deserve enhances it. Along those lines, we need to identify the things that are the most important and give them the care they require. We cannot live well unless we consistently do that.

Care for Ourselves

The reality of that brings us back full circle to the Mickey Mantle statement with which we began. Notice the clause in it, "**I'd have taken better care of myself.**" It implies a fact that all of us desperately need to grasp. There's something for which we and we alone are able to care. No one else can take care of it for us. That something is ourselves. Only we can take care of ourselves. Others can assist us, but the onus in doing so is on us. It's our responsibility and ours alone.

When I say "**ourselves,**" I mean our physical being, our bodies. We and we alone can care for our bodies. So, we do that. First, we study and learn their nature and order. Second, we determine what is necessary to take care of them. And third, we do what is necessary.

Take sleep, for instance. Understanding the nature of our bodies, we recognize that we must get enough sleep. Too little or too much is detrimental to us. If we're adults, less than seven hours is generally too little and more than nine too much. So, we sleep no less than seven hours and no more than nine. We and we alone control if we'll do that.

When I say "**ourselves,**" I also mean, and primarily so, our spiritual being, our inner dimensions. Those inner dimensions are our mind with its thoughts, memories, and perceptions, our mind with its feelings (emotions and desires), our will, our soul, and our bodily habits. We and we alone can care for our inner dimensions. So, we do that. First, we learn their nature and order. Second, we determine what is necessary to care for them. And third, we do what is necessary.

I've tried to assist you in doing that over the years. I've preached many sermons about the nature and order of our inner dimensions and

how to take care of them. We need to take what we've learned and live it out. I explained, for instance, that nothing enters our mind without affecting it for good or ill. Understanding that, we guard what enters our mind. Or I explained that our feelings often aren't rooted in reality. Understanding that, we reason with our feelings. Or I explained that God's written word, the Bible, can restore our soul (Psalm 19:7). Understanding that, we devote time and concentration to that word. We and we alone control if we'll do those things.

It's true then. We should take care of ourselves (our physical and spiritual beings) because ultimately, we and we alone can.

Conclusion

To this point, I've explained the clause in Mantle's statement. I leave you now with its prepositional phrase, **"If I knew I was going to live this long."** Question - How long are we going to live? The Bible tells us. It's forever. As Dallas Willard precisely said it, **"We are never-ceasing spiritual beings with an eternal destiny."** That's a profound reality. When we start living at conception, we never stop, which raises a vital question. How should we live in light of that fact? The answer is by apprenticing ourselves to Jesus. We make and carry out the decision to be with Him in order to become like Him and to do all that He says.

When we do that, the Holy Spirit enters into us. And when He enters into us, we're no longer the only one or even the primary one caring for our spiritual being. He is. As we do our secondary part, take care of it, He does His primary part. He continually transforms our inner dimensions so that we increasingly think, feel, will, act, and react like Jesus. That in turn has a destiny determining effect: abundance of life now, on earth, and fullness of life later, in heaven. That's our lot in this never-ceasing life of ours if we do our part. So, let's do our part. Let's apprentice ourselves to Jesus and then take care of ourselves.