

Keeping Your Heart in Ship-Shape: A Brief Intro to Soul Care

“Swab the decks!” In my memory, I hear Mom use those words telling me to get back to the work at hand—scrubbing the kitchen floor! A squeaky clean job was in order.



Before the days of cleaning fiberglass boat decks with a chamois cloth like we do today, the phrase “Swab the decks” came from cleaning classic, wood-decked ships with salt water, the one effective solution to clean their decks. It was done throughout the day. Boatdesign.net references swabbing the decks through the night as well.¹ The job was definitely daily and necessary.

Why was it so essential? Because the decks would get wet, slippery, and dangerous if they were not “constantly washed off.”² Mold and algae would grow in the cracks without daily cleansing. Further, the deck planking required frequent swabbing to keep the planks swollen, thus preventing leakage. Moreover, the cleaning prevented “accelerated rusting of the deck and equipment”³ and helped keep the ship in, well, ship-shape.

¹Obtained from <https://www.boatdesign.net/threads/swabbing-the-decks.45277/>. Accessed on 4/8/2021.

²Obtained from <http://www.boatdesign.net/forums/all-things-boats-and-boating/swabbing-decks-45277.html>. Accessed on 2/3/2017.

³Obtained from <https://en.wikipedia.org/Ordinaryseaman>. Accessed 2/3/2017.

This attention to the decks was the job of every “ordinary seaman.” These sailors looked forward to earning their “able seaman ticket,” thus no longer being involved in constant labor on the deck. “Able seaman” training was for six, twelve, or eighteen months or as long as three years. One source states each timeframe referenced a different level of able seamanship. Those having completed three years received their ticket to work in any waters throughout the whole world. Theirs was called an “unlimited” ticket.⁴

Whether floors in a house or a ship's deck, swabbing refers to diligent cleaning. But what about our hearts and souls? Often we refer to the innermost part of ourselves as being our hearts. Scripture does also. It refers to our minds, affections, wills, and desires. Some Scriptural references to our hearts are: Jesus said that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34); Paul says to set our hearts on things above (Colossians 3:2); the writer of Hebrews references the Word of God judging “the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

It is worth noting that we are born in a depraved heart condition because of the sin nature that each human being has inherited from our “first parents,” Adam and Eve. We have all been subjected to that sin nature with its consequences so that we all might have the opportunity to receive God's mercy through Jesus Christ (Romans 11:32).

Cleaning agents to scrub any floors of the house or a ship's wooden deck are presented by people. But what is there to clean the soul? Sin is so deep in us that there is no water, no solvent, or any other humanly produced cleanser for the soul. It must come from God, who made us and who alone provides the only solution for this otherwise impossible task.

Enter: Jesus Christ!

With Jesus' willful obedience to His Father, God sent Him, His only Son, from heaven into the world. He took on our human flesh so that He could be the only and perfect sacrifice for our sins. Only the blood of Jesus Christ can wash away sin from our souls.

Jesus' blood cleanses us when we first come to Him, committing ourselves to God through Him. It cleanses us not only then, but also as we continue to live on earth. So often that we cannot even count the times, our humanity rears its fleshly self; we sin; and our hearts are in need of washing—again! The Scriptures state in 1 John 1:9 that, when we confess our sins to God, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Though God does all the actual work cleaning us, it is the responsibility of each child of God to cooperate with Him in their soul care—that is, to do our part to guard our hearts, renew our minds, and to live in the Spirit.

Additionally, in doing our part for daily soul care, just as only salt water was effective to swab the ships' decks; for humanity, there is also only one authority by which we can live in the Spirit. That authority is the Bible, the Holy Scriptures. In John 17:17, Jesus stated that the “word is truth” and that it sanctifies. Jesus also said in John 14:23 that, if we love Him, we will obey His teaching. Reading the Bible is central to our knowing what is evil, what is good, what we are to do, and how to do it—even why.

⁴Obtained from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ordinary_seaman. Accessed on 4/8/2021.

Furthermore, as swabbing the decks was vital daily, it is also daily necessary to attend to our souls lest we step into multiple spiritual hazards. This spiritual vulnerability can include adopting counter-biblical attitudes, belief in the world's lies, and saturation in cultural behaviors. Worse, all the while we might believe God would be honored in these. Rather, in that scenario, one would be dangerously closer to forgetting Him altogether by living in the flesh instead of in the Spirit. By-products of this are becoming unable to discern truth and eventually being unable to understand truth.

In contrast, living according to the Word of God brings rest for our souls, the steadfast love of God in our lives, and constant cleansing of our souls by the Spirit of God. This is in addition to growing in peace, joy, patience, faithfulness, self-control and other amazing and wonderful gifts and traits God gives us.

Here's another parallel to swabbing the decks all day and all night. In the Psalms, David gives evidence to thinking on the ways and word of the Lord both day and night. We can train ourselves to do likewise. Psalm 1 states “Blessed is the man [whose] (vs 1) . . . delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates.” When? “Day and night” (vs 2). The exciting result is becoming fruitful like tree[s] “planted by streams of water” (vs 3).

As for the seamanship training, note it took three years to be trained for any waters. While most theologians agree it was close to the end of Jesus' second year in public ministry when He sent the Twelve to minister to the lost sheep of Israel, it wasn't until after they had followed Jesus for three years *and* after His death and resurrection that they were commissioned to go to every part of the world and preach the gospel.⁵

This being true—and Bible colleges and seminaries having utilized this three-year training concept, it might be right away after choosing Jesus that we are called on to share the reason of our hope. Just to set you at ease: whether a starting point or your whole response when you are asked, “Because of Jesus” is always an appropriate answer.

The last analogy I bring you in this article relates to keeping the wood planks swollen to prevent leakage. My late husband was an avid boater and particularly knowledgeable in wooden runabouts (“woodies”). When the lakes open after winter's ice and the piers are back in, it's not unusual to see wood boats soaking to prepare for the new boating season. My late husband said it takes “about a week, give or take,” for this process—depending on the boat's size and condition.

The boat owner or the marina let the boat into the water a little at a time until it is lowered to the water line; thus literally, the boater *soaks* the “woodie” in the water to swell the wood and seal cracks in the hull (the bottom of the boat). The swollen hull boards then keep the boat from taking in water while it's on the water.

In the spiritual realm, God uses our “soaking” (reading, studying, and thinking on the Scriptures) to “seal the planks” in our souls. These are among the spiritual disciplines by which we grow in the Lord and are prepared to navigate spiritually in the world.

⁵ Then, they still had to wait until after the Holy Spirit descended on them during the feast of Pentecost.

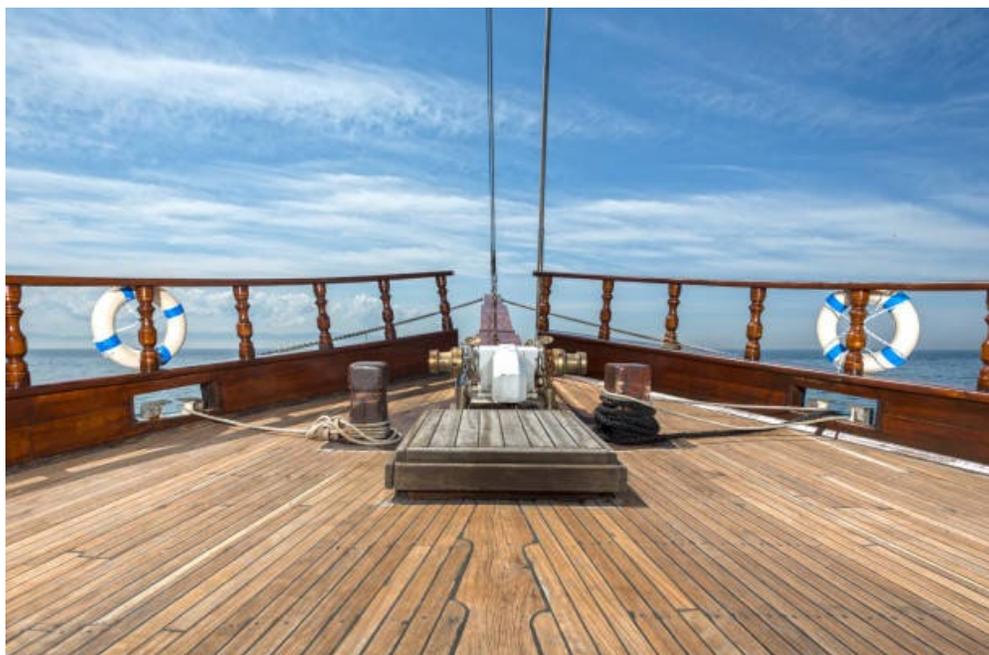
In conclusion, swabbing the decks cleaned them and preserved the function of the ships and the health of the crew and passengers. It took place on purpose day and night with salt water. If the ship's decks got dirty, it meant danger, deterioration, defenselessness, and less efficiency for the ship and crew as a whole.

Every believer needs to be vigilant about reading and obeying the Holy Scriptures, the only “water with salt” for our souls. Thence, by God's marvelous grace, we grow in Him.

Could it be that right now our hearts are in need of swabbing? May we make use of the grace God lavishes on us, and persevere to “soak” daily in His cleansing Word, so that we might enjoy the benefits of our souls being in ship-shape.

To Him be all glory, honor, and praise!

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Boat photo obtained from:

<https://www.istockphoto.com/search/2/image?phrase=old%20ship%20deck&family=creative>.
Accessed on 9/26/2021.

His Hope
MINISTRIES