

Self-examination

I'm grateful for good medical care, but it seems like the older I get the more I need exams and tests for almost all my bodily functions, including my skin, heart, eyesight, and joints! And I'm being bombarded by ads for hearing aids. We're getting estimates for replacing our house's HVAC system, as technicians warn us that the present system is no longer dependable. Exams are required in life!

In our second Scripture we read how Paul warned the church in Corinth to take an important test of their spiritual condition, which is an important word to us:

2 Corinthians 13:5-10

5 *Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test!* **6** *I hope you will find out that we have not failed.* **7** *But we pray to God that you may not do anything wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.* **8** *For we cannot do anything against the truth but only for the truth.* **9** *For we rejoice when we are weak but you are strong. This is what we pray for, that you may be restored.* **10** *So I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.*

Paul's detractors had been questioning his apostolic authority, but he replied that they really need to turn their critical eyes on themselves. The word order in verse 5 puts the pronoun “yourselves” in the emphatic position, saying literally, “Yourselves examine!” Here we see Paul is not trying to get the last word in an argument, but rather is genuinely concerned that in their evaluating his performance as an apostle, they might be oblivious to their own spiritual condition. The issue of whether the Corinthian church members were themselves “in the faith” was a more vital matter than trying to prove Paul a heretic.

I read somewhere that married men tend to live longer than single men. One of the reasons is that wives will prod their husbands to go to the doctor. This is true in our marriage. We men tend to think of ourselves as indestructible and immune to all the diseases and deterioration that beset all the rest of mankind. But medical exams are an incentive to take better care of ourselves and also follow her/his advice.

Paul is challenging the Corinthians to give themselves a check-up about an even more important issue. He said they didn't need to see a physician, but could examine themselves. The Message paraphrases these words as “*Give yourselves regular checkups. You need firsthand evidence, not mere hearsay, that Jesus Christ is in you.*” Paul subjected himself to such check-ups, as we see in verses like 1 Corinthians 9: 27: “*...I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*”

We need to question ourselves, and as Paul admonishes in this text, to go take an exam. In fact, with the word of God, and the witness of the Holy Spirit, we can and must examine ourselves. Paul says, “*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith;*

test yourselves.” In some academic institutions, teachers and professors do what’s called, “grading on the curve.” That means they average all the test scores and adjust the grades accordingly. So if no one does well, the grades are adjusted accordingly so more of the students will receive a passing grade. God’s test is not graded on the curve. You can’t hope to pass because someone else in the class is worse than you. Similarly, physicians don’t give physical exams on the curve. They don’t give you a clean bill of health because you are not quite as sick as another patient. You are examined on the basis of your physical condition and not in relationship with others. Paul says we can’t even measure ourselves by ourselves, but only by Christ (2 Cor. 10:12), and by what he thinks of us (1 Cor. 4:1-5). So we are given the standard of whether or not Christ Jesus is living within us, whether or not we have a relationship with him (v. 5).

Paul posits the possibility that there will be some in the congregation at Corinth who will fail this crucial test. As you recall, the Corinthian culture valued rhetoric, and often elevated style over substance. Paul was denigrated because he was not considered an impressive speaker. And Paul knew that the more eloquent “super apostles” eloquently parroted the truths of the faith and even the gospel, but were themselves bereft of grace. They would be failing the test of saving faith because they relied only on their knowledge and use of words.

It is important that we as believers confess that Jesus is Lord. Paul tells these same Corinthian believers that making the good confession of Jesus as Lord is made possible only by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). And our Lord Jesus says we must acknowledge him before others if we expect him to acknowledge us to the heavenly Father (Matt. 10:32-33). Again, Paul wrote to the Romans, *“That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved”* (Rom. 10:9-10).

But there is the danger, Jesus warns us, that mere words can deceive if not spoken in sincerity and accompanied by saving grace through the Holy Spirit. Those will fail who rely on merely a profession of faith. What is crucial is a *possession* of faith. Jesus warned against just words, if there was no evidence of fruit in our lives. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘*Lord, Lord,*’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). Our words, without a genuine experience of grace, will actually condemn us (Matt. 12:37). And our rituals, such as baptism, and our records, such as church membership, will be only condemning evidence of hypocrisy. Jesus denounced the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, who were also condemned by Isaiah:

“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Mark 7:6-7, quoting Isaiah 29:13).

Words are important for us when we make a sincere confession of faith, but our words and rituals must be authenticated by a true experience and possession of faith. Those of

us who grew up in the environment of the faith are particularly susceptible to this danger. Well-meaning parents can coach their children to say the right words that gain a child entrance into confirmation and church membership, and familiarity with the right doctrinal words and language of faith and the church can deceive one into thinking he or she has experienced saving grace. And this absence of faith is uncovered when perhaps as an adolescent or young adult that person realizes the void and either, tragically, renounces the faith deemed irrelevant altogether or, hopefully, seeks a genuine relationship with Christ.

Good religious deeds, like financial giving and serving on church committees, can deceive not only a lot of others, but even ourselves. There were some folks at Corinth, perhaps even in leadership, who were not truly converted. They didn't think they were heathens, nor did others in the church. They were assuming they were properly certified members of the kingdom of God because they had gone through the proper rites of initiation. Some had risen to the top in church leadership because of their impressive leadership and talents that the church assumed were spiritual gifts. Perhaps some were these "super apostles" who were so busy discrediting Paul they had no time to examine themselves.

Religion involves good deeds, the opportunity to do good things and give a lot of money to good causes. But if the heart is unconverted, then these works are to no avail with God, and done out of the wrong motive. And the very performance of them can lead to a false sense of security. Religion also involves emotion. If you watched any important football game, you see a lot of emotion, and even how it played a big part in the performance of the teams. I believe Jesus was indicating the role that emotion plays in self-deception about eternal life when he gave the parable of the seed and the soils (Lk. 8). Some, like the shallow soil, receive the word with joy, but don't have any depth for the word to take root. Hebrews 6:4 refers to those who "taste the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age," and yet who finally and fatally fall away, and cannot be restored again to repentance. Obviously, there is a crucial difference between sampling or tasting and fully digesting the saving grace of God.

When Jesus told the parable of the weeds growing amidst the wheat, and the need to wait till harvest time for God's judgment to divide the two, he was referring to the impossibility for us to make any judgment as to the validity of everyone's conversion. Only on the day of the Lord will true believers and counterfeit professors of faith be distinguished from one another. This judging will be done by the Lord, the infallible Judge (Matt. 13:24-30; 36-43).

Paul seems to be confident that most of the Corinthians will pass the test. Showing his pastoral heart, he is certainly eager for them to do so. He is even willing to be considered a flunky himself in order that they examine themselves and come out on the side of the truth, with a passing grade (v.7). Even the writer of Hebrews, when he warns the readers against falling away as counterfeits, expresses confidence "*of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation*" (Heb. 6:9).

The word of God clearly gives all we need to know and do to receive God's passing grade. We pass the examination of our salvation if we have, first of all, made the true confession of Jesus as Lord, and not just as Savior. Paul certainly alludes to this when he says we are to make certain we are "*in the faith*" (v. 5). *The faith* is a reference to the body of truth contained in the gospel. I have heard people defending the validity of their salvation by giving a chronicle of crises when they called on Jesus to help them, even out of a foxhole in the midst of combat. But whoever calls on the name of *the Lord* is the one who will be saved (Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:13).

Paul refers to this confession when he says "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:3). This true confession is of the objective reality of Jesus Christ, and of our trust in him alone to save us. We believe he died and rose again, and we call on him alone to save us. By the merits of his death, the righteous dying for the unrighteous, our forgiveness and deliverance from sin's consequences are provided. It's not enough that we simply want what he can do for us. We must accept him on his own terms, which means his demand to be our Lord, our Master.

Paul implies also that we pass the test if there is communion with Christ. "*Do you not realize that Christ is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?*" (v. 5). The central doctrine of the Apostle Paul is 'being in Christ,' and here he reminds us that if we are truly converted we have the experience of Christ's being in us. Paul says if we don't have the Spirit in us, we don't really belong to Christ, but when he is in us as regenerate believers, we have the witness of his presence (Rom. 8:9). We have the objective truth of the gospel and the promises of God. But also, he does live within us, and the experience of his fellowship is real, even though we don't base our assurance on mere emotion. There will be seasons when you doubt, and days when you don't "feel" very saved. You may be in a time of spiritual drought, but the fact that you are aware of your dryness, and long for a season of refreshing, is evidence that you have a relationship with the Lord Jesus.

As we examine ourselves, the most important aspect of the fruit of the Spirit that evidences salvation is love, selfless, Christ-like involvement in meeting the needs of others. Love should be the wrapping of all the other virtues (Col. 3:14), and is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:10). In *The Love Chapter* of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says that without love even religious devotion and charitable activity amount to zero. Even sacrifice and martyrdom is zero. He says there that we need to step back from our religious activity and ask, "Why am I doing this?" Love makes us more like Jesus.

Even in my old age as a Christian, I still am capable of doing things that cause me to ask myself in dismay, "What's becoming of me?" By the grace of God, I am not what I used to be, and by his grace alone I am becoming, if but ever so slowly, what he wants me to be. Am I trusting Jesus? Do I have a personal walk with him? Am I becoming, if but too slowly, more like him? These will be in the affirmative if we have a true possession of faith.

We know we are saved by grace through faith alone. And yet, faith that saves us will change our lives and produce works. In answer to the question about eternal life, Jesus told the expert in the law the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), who gave evidence that he had experienced the transforming grace of God. We are saved by grace, but God has such confidence in the fruit of grace in our lives that he will judge us by works (Matt. 25:31-46). Paul adds, "our prayer is for your perfection" (9). The word *to perfect* is used in the gospels to describe the disciples *mending their fishing nets* (Mk. 1:19; and Matt. 4:21). This verb also is used for setting broken bones. One translation (ESV) says "*Your restoration is what we pray for.*" This is not a reference to sinless perfection but functional usefulness in the kingdom. Restoration is an ongoing process for any building or house, which we're discovering with our own 20-something year-old home. The disciples had to mend their nets for them to be useful for fishing. Our lives are to grow in godliness and power for them to be useful in the kingdom.

Although I'm not a real car lover, Jan and I enjoyed a TV series about a team of auto body restorers doing an amazing job restoring old classic cars. My hope is that someday I'll be fully restored, from a rusty old jalopy into the condition of a restored classic. God hasn't given up on us yet, nor will he ever. He said he will not stop restoring us until we reach perfection on the Day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:3-6). You may not feel like you're making much progress, but if you're truly a child of God, you're more like Jesus than when you first believed. And, some day you'll be exactly like him, for you will see him face to face (1 Jn. 3:2).

God wants us to have assurance we're his children. And best of all, our Judge, Teacher and Great Physician will see to it that we pass with "flying colors."