

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

“Examine Yourself Whether You Be In The Faith”

By Luther Blackmon

This title is a quotation from 2 Corinthians 13:5. The lusts of the flesh and the maneuvering of some false teachers had led the Corinthian Christians into some grievous sins. The first Corinthian letter, it seems, had corrected most of these sins, and the second letter is much less sharp. Notwithstanding their improvement, however, the apostle closes this letter with the admonition, “*examine yourselves whether you be in the faith.*”

It was to this same church Paul had said concerning the Lord’s supper, “*But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup.*” Again he said to the Ephesian elders, “*Take heed unto yourselves*” (Acts 20:28). To the evangelist Timothy, “*Take heed unto thyself and unto thy doctrine*” (1 Tim. 4:16). In Galatians 6:1-2 he commands, “*Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself lest thou also be tempted.*” The life of the Christian should be one of perpetual self-inventory.

A Difficult Task

I think it likely that few, if any of us, have the ability to examine our own motives and conduct with absolute fairness and honesty. Burns, the Scotch poet, recognized this fact when he expressed the desire that we might have the gift to “*see ourselves as others see us.*” If this were possible it might not be very flattering, but I dare say it would make most of us more humble. However, the important thing is not so much how others see us, but how God sees us. And be sure that God sees us as we really are. A pious air and outward show may conceal our sins from the multitudes for a time, but they are only a transparent veneer through which God sees a wretched soul.

There are several reasons why it is difficult for us to examine ourselves without partiality. One is our inclination to measure ourselves by others. The man, for example, who lacks the moral courage to turn his back on the world and obey the gospel, can always find a convenient hypocrite in the church with which to compare himself and try to justify his own weakness.

The unfaithful Christian who no longer finds happiness in the fellowship of the saints, and who finds church attendance boring and tiring, can always find some brother who beats his debts or takes a few drinks or indulges in some other ungodly practice. Then he begins to look at all Christians through this shabby specimen and decides finally that church attendance can add nothing to his righteous life. If we must compare ourselves with others, why not pick the best ones. This is seldom, if ever done for two reasons. (1) It would not serve our purpose. (2) One who is sincere enough to make such a comparison as this is willing to examine himself in the light of divine truth. Let us remember that “*they measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves among themselves are not wise*” (2 Cor. 10:12).

Again we hesitate to sound the depths of our own souls because we fear the results. In this we are like the man who refuses to submit to physical examination, because he fears the diagnosis — as if refusing to face the truth could cure the disease. I am convinced, from my own past experience, that many members of the church could not live with their consciences if they should, in all honesty and candor, search their own hearts in the light of truth. Man at his best cuts a sorry figure when measured by God’s standard of righteousness. And man is seldom at his best.

Once more, we shrink back from an impartial self-examination, because of our pride in our own strength. Human vanity is a powerful influence. It takes more spiritual and moral courage than some people can ever muster to say, “*I was wrong.*” However, if we but knew it, man is never really strong until his strength gives way to the strength that comes from above, “*...for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong*” (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Departure From Faith Gradual

In the individual Christian as in the church, departure from the faith is gradual. I maintain that it is a psychological impossibility for a faithful Christian to suddenly make up his mind that he will no longer serve the Lord. I realize that there are many counterfeit Christians who “*joined the church*” for some selfish reason; these will turn away as soon as the devil raises the bid. Then there are others who are very young in the faith, and who, through some great temptation or passion, are overcome. These are often ashamed to come back and face the humiliation. But people who know the truth and who have tried the Christian life successfully for some time, simply do not fall away suddenly. Their apostasy is always gradual; sometimes so gradual that they themselves are not aware of their change. We have doubtless read of the frog which was boiled in water without feeling the pain, because the heat was increased so gradually that he was not aware of the change in temperature. But he died! There is no doubt that the saints in Laodicea

started off in the same manner as did those of Philadelphia and Smyrna, but when the Lord dictated the letter to that church in Revelation 3, these Laodiceans were saying of themselves, ***“We are rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing.”*** But the Lord said they were ***“wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.”*** There was quite a contrast.

Signs Along the Way

Many people die every year of diseases which might be cured if discovered in their incipency. In like manner, there are hundreds of people in the church who are on their way to eternal damnation, who might be saved if they could be made to recognize the danger that threatens them. Apostasy, like disease of the body, casts its ugly shadow, and the discerning eye can see the signs and symptoms.

One symptom is lack of spiritual appetite. How is your appetite for spiritual things? Peter said, ***“As new born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby”*** (1 Pet. 2:2). Paul said to the Corinthians, ***“I have fed you with milk and not with meat for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able.”*** These Corinthians had come out of heathenism but a short time ago, and here the apostle implies that they should be able to eat meat. But they were not. Their spiritual digestive powers still called for milk. Pause here and ask yourself the holiest question: ***“Has my desire for spiritual food increased since I became a Christian?”*** If the answer is no, then you have started in the other direction, because there is no such thing as ***“holding your own”*** spiritually. The only man mentioned in the Bible as holding his own went to hell for it. This was the one talent man. The Christian life is like a bicycle ride, either you move ahead or you fall over. The Hebrew Christians had been in the church long enough that they should have been teachers, but they needed to be taught again the first principles. They were not as well off as when they first obeyed the gospel. I am told that a wasp is larger when he is hatched than at any other time. As a rule a new born babe in Christ is anxious to learn the Bible. He is an enthusiastic student. But as time goes by and he learns that there is no short cut, or royal road, to real Bible knowledge but that it takes a lot of time, and study, he often loses his enthusiasm. Most churches have classes on the Lord’s day and some through the week. It has been my experience that not more than two-thirds of the members attend. If admonished to attend, this one who does not attend has an excuse. As a rule these excuses can be exposed as worthless alibis, trumped up after he decides not to attend the classes. He is trying to quiet an uneasy conscience. He cannot let himself be truthful and say, ***“I simply do not care to attend these classes; I prefer to watch television.”*** This fellow may not know it, but he is on his way back to the beggarly elements of the world. A person need not tell me, with a straight face, that he loves the Lord and desires to ***“grow in grace and in the knowledge of the truth,”*** when he spends more time reading the sports page than he spends reading the Bible.

David said of the man in the first Psalm, ***“But his delight is in the law of the Lord and in His law doth he meditate day and night.”*** He does not read the Bible day and night, but he thinks of what he has read frequently. The law of the Lord is uppermost in his mind. I came, one day, upon brother J. Early Arceneaux hoeing in his garden. When we had exchanged greetings, the next thing he said was ***“I was just thinking of a new argument on Mark 16:16.”*** Arceneaux has forgotten more than some ever learn about the Bible, but he still has a voracious appetite for knowledge of the truth. Let us examine ourselves for lack of spiritual appetite.

Another common and very noticeable symptom of apostasy in the Christian is his aversion to plain gospel preaching.

In preachers this symptom first shows in an overwhelming sweetness, flavored with a few snide remarks about those who lack the ***“spirit of Christ.”*** In the second stage, he starts talking and writing about “negative” preaching, and laments the “sectarian bigotry” among some brethren. Then in the last stage, he has lifted up his eyes to horizons far beyond the wildest imaginations of his less spiritual brethren, and his “love” has outgrown any legalistic interpretation of the Scriptures or concept of the church that would exclude from his fellowship that great host of God-fearing people who cannot trim their faith to “our” view of Christianity. He has now “arrived.” If you know such a preacher, take a good look at him. He will not be around long. He has outgrown the New Testament plea.

In those who do not preach, the pattern is much the same except that they usually do not leave the church altogether and join a denomination. They don’t need to now. They can find a “Church of Christ” where the truth has been sufficiently watered down to suit their worldly and liberal tastes. When a member of the church begins to talk about how sweet and broadminded some preacher is and how the church has just grown in leaps and bounds where he is preaching, I know what is coming next. He is about to begin to give me some advice on how to preach. He thinks the truth ought to be preached by all means. Certainly so, but he thinks there is a right way to preach it. He brought his Methodist friend one night, and I preached on baptism and said that people who had not been immersed had not been baptized. That friend would never come back, he feared. Or perhaps I preached that mixed bathing, wearing shorts, and dancing were wrong because they are productive of lasciviousness; that members of the Lord’s church ought not take even a social drink. He thinks these might be wrong; but he knows some people who are doing things worse than these, and I might well spend my time preaching on love and be more of a “positive” preacher — not so much against everything.

Whether I can ever convince him or not, this fellow is in the process of departing from the faith. This is one of the signs. And, whether I convince him or not, I shall continue to preach as I have in the past against that which is wrong. Call it negative if you will. Paul said, ***“preach the word...reprove, rebuke, exhort...”*** Someone came close to the truth when he said that the work of the gospel preacher is to ***“comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”***

A gospel preacher must be always a gentleman. Harshness of speech and boorish manners are inexcusable. But if the plain preaching of Bible truth offends you, then it is you that needs to change, not the preacher. ***“Examine yourselves whether you be in the faith.”*** – ***Truth Magazine***, September 1958 and March 1, 2001. ■

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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