

A CALL TO SELF-EXAMINATION

SERIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF MODELS

By Doug Goins

“Testing” is a normal part of our lives, and something that we often take for granted. We are subjected to all sorts of tests throughout our lifetime: academic, medical, even professional. For instance, if you want to drive a vehicle, you must take a written test, a driving test, and an eye exam to get your driver’s license. If you want to be a lawyer you have to pass the Bar Exam. Just this week I had a test taken to check the cholesterol level in my blood.

There are also personal tests that none of us can avoid in life; things like illness, broken dreams, peer pressure, failures in our life, suffering, financial pressures, and even moral temptation. All of those things are tests that confront us, whether we like it or not.

In 2 Corinthians 13:5-10, we are called to *voluntarily* test ourselves; to search our own hearts. We are to examine our lives to see if, in Paul’s words, “we are in the faith.” You may recall how Paul, in his first letter to the church in Corinth, invited us to take a spiritual inventory of our lives: “...a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (Corinthians 11:28). The six verses we are considering today also call us to self-examination.

I have organized this short paragraph around five important questions. In applying Paul’s challenge, I am certain that each one of us will find ourselves somewhere in the text. The five questions for you to consider as we work through these verses are: 1) Am I solid in the faith?; 2) Is my lifestyle in obedience to Jesus Christ?; 3) Am I committed to following God’s word?; 4) Am I prayerfully optimistic about the people around me?; and, 5) Am I getting easier to live with in my exercise of spiritual authority or leadership?

Let’s begin with the first question and work our way through.

Am I solid in the faith?

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you--unless indeed you fail the test? But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test. (2 Corinthians 13:5, 6)

If you look at verse 5 very carefully, the word “yourselves” appears three different times. Paul puts it there three times for emphasis. This is not merely an emphasis in repetition, but even in the original language those three words are emphasized because they are out of the normal order of sentence structure. The way the sentence reads, literally, is: “You yourselves test, you yourselves examine, you yourselves recognize” to see if Jesus Christ is in you. The emphasis is on each one of us, as individuals, examining ourselves to see whether Jesus, in reality, lives inside of us. Look at how Eugene Peterson paraphrases these verses:

Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don't drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular check-ups. You need firsthand evidence, not mere hearsay, that Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it. I hope the test won't show that we have failed.

(2 Corinthians 13:5, 6)

Like the Corinthians, we know that there are sinful attitudes or sinful behavior patterns in our lives. Previously, in our study of chapter 12 (Discovery Paper #4656), Paul confronted them on sinful patterns of behavior and sinful attitudes in their lives. He knew about strife at work among them, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, and disturbances (12:20). And then, at the end of verse 21, he lists sins of personal morality—impurity, immorality, and sensuality. The presence of any of these things at work in our lives should cause us to ask ourselves: “Am I a true Christian?”

And that is the literal meaning of the phrase at the end of verses 5 and 6 where Paul says, “Indeed you fail the test”... “We ourselves do not fail the test.” The meaning of that little phrase “fail the test” means “counterfeit”—to be proven inauthentic. So we must ask ourselves, “Am I truly born again? Am I a member of God’s spiritual family?” Or, in terms of this counterfeit issue, “Am I just putting up a front?” “Has there been no spiritual transformation in my life?”

The very fact that the apostle Paul asks this question indicates this is what marks true Christianity—Jesus Christ has come to live within us. Paul doesn’t ask how faithful we are in church attendance, how well we offer grace at the meal table, nor does he ask us how much Bible knowledge we have. Rather, he asks the most fundamental of questions, “Are we standing in the circle of faith in which Jesus Christ is the absolute center?”

There are three terms in verse 5 that help guide us in conducting this self-examination of our faith. The first is the word “test.” It means an objective evaluation. The apostle Paul, in Romans 10:9, summarizes this objective reality. Paul writes,

...that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

We can ask ourselves these questions: “Do I have a personal relationship with Christ? Have I asked him to save me from my sin? Have I really surrendered to him as Lord of my life? Have I embraced the reality of his death and resurrection? And the promise that in dying to sin, am I spiritually saved from my old life? Am I truly born again to a new life?”

The second word in the verse is the word “examine”—looking for specific proof. If you pass that first test, that objective evaluation, then there is no sense of pessimism, or doubt about the outcome. The Greek word used here carries with it the idea of examining for the purpose of approving. It’s not about failing. So, as Christians, we examine ourselves with hopeful optimism about God’s redemptive activity in our lives. And, if we are believers, there doesn’t have to be any fear of self-examination.

The scriptures promise us that we will be truly different because Jesus Christ lives inside of us. There are a number of examples in the scriptures that we could find in terms of the difference that Jesus makes, and the apostle John lists several in his first letter. First, we love other Christians more and more. John writes in 1 John 3:14, “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren.”

Secondly, our thoughts, our habits, and our goals will be focused on pleasing Jesus more and more, living like Jesus, and honoring Jesus with how we live our lives. It's what the Bible refers to as "practicing righteousness." John says, "If you know that [Jesus] is righteous, then you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him" (1 John 2:29).

Finally, our ability to resist worldly influences and the sinful temptations Paul listed at the end of chapter 12 (selfishness, sexual immorality, jealousy, anger, competitiveness, etc.) will increase. From the Amplified text, we read: "For whatever is born of God is victorious over the world; and this is the victory that conquers the world, even our faith. Who is it that is victorious over [that conquers] the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:4, 5 – The Amplified Bible). Saving faith makes a difference in responding to temptation in our lives.

The third word of self-examination is the word "recognize," which speaks of inner discernment, self-awareness. The apostle Paul writes about that in Romans 8:16: "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." There will be an internal witness of the Holy Spirit, an inner confirmation that we are, in fact, believers, resulting in a growing sense of peace, confidence, and stability in life. That is amplified again in 1 John:

He who believes in the Son of God has the testimony within himself... He who possesses the Son has that [eternal] life; he who does not possess the Son of God does not have that life. I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have life, yes, eternal life" (1 John 5:10a, 12, 13 – The Amplified Bible)

We can live increasingly with confidence, with a sense of who we are in Jesus Christ. Let's look again at 2 Corinthians 13:6 where Paul writes, "But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test." Notice that Paul includes himself in this process, this discipline of spiritual self-examination. He turns the finger that he has been pointing at them, "You examine yourselves, you test yourselves," back at himself because the scriptures encourage all of us to self-examination. There is very little said about us checking out other people's spirituality. Every one of us ought to occasionally ask ourselves: "Are we consistently living out our faith? Does our behavior exemplify what we say we believe? Do our lives really reflect that Christ lives within us?"

That leads us to the next question.

Is my lifestyle in obedience to Jesus Christ?

Paul writes,

Now we pray to God that you do no wrong; not that we ourselves may appear approved, but that you may do what is right, even though we should appear unapproved. (2 Corinthians 13:7)

Paul makes it clear in this verse that he doesn't want the Corinthians to fail this test just to prove his concerns, which he voiced at the end of chapter 12, were accurate. Nor does he want them to live in obedience to Jesus Christ just so that he can brag about them. Paul doesn't mind being criticized for their sakes, so long as they live in obedience to Jesus Christ.

He is not concerned about his own reputation because, as he says, God knows his heart. But, as his spiritual children growing up in faith, he was concerned about their Christian character.

As a parent of four kids, I really identify with Paul's concerns. I want my children straight with the Lord as they move into young adulthood, but not for my sake or just to make me look good. I want them resisting evil. I want them pursuing righteousness. I want them to know that they are fully accepted and approved by God for their own sake so they can live comfortably, confidently, and out of obedience.

Am I committed to following God's word?

The answer to the third question is found in verse 8.

For we can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth.

Paul is not saying that it's impossible to attack the truth or to hinder the word of God. But if the Corinthians will examine themselves, in the words of verse 7 "don't do what is wrong, but do what is right" (paraphrased), if they will repent of these sinful attitudes and these sinful behaviors, and if they will pursue righteousness, it would all be according to the word of God. Paul knows the word of God is unstoppable and that it's going to be accomplished. So, why try to ignore or resist what God has said?

The apostle Peter encourages us as well to leave our old lives behind and to fall more deeply in love with the word of God and with the truth of God. Peter writes, "Therefore, putting aside all malice and all guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted of the kindness of the Lord" (1 Peter 2:1-3). That is salvation: tasting God's kindness.

Am I prayerfully optimistic about those around me?

Verse 9 is about prayer. It's about optimism and how we look at the people around us.

For we rejoice when we ourselves are weak but you are strong; this we also pray for, that you be made complete.

Paul is encouraging these believers with the assurance of his personal prayers for them. He prayed with confidence and optimism for their spiritual maturity. Here, Paul is expressing confidence in the fact that these people *can* change, and because he knows who God is, and that God is at work in them, they *will* be changed. He says that confidently, even in the face of constant criticism, carping, challenging, as well as rejection. Paul never gives up his commitment to these people, but keeps pursuing them in love. And he tells us what allows him to do so in 2 Corinthians, chapters 11 and 12, when he asks these rhetorical questions: "Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!" (11:11)... "And I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less?" (12:15). We have seen before that it was God's love, *agape* love, at work in him that kept Paul hanging in there with these difficult people. Notice that it's not Paul's natural affection or fondness, but the supernatural work of God in him. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 that this kind

of love, *agape* love, “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. *Love never fails...*” (13, 7, 8a, emphasis mine). But, it is only God’s love that can make us optimistic, that can make us hopeful, and that can keep us praying for people with whom we struggle. I have learned over the years that it’s really difficult to be resentful toward someone or to be pessimistic about them if I am sincerely praying for them on a regular basis.

Am I getting easier to live with in my exercise of spiritual authority?

Paul addresses the final question in verse 10:

For this reason I am writing these things while absent, in order that when present I may not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me, for building up and not tearing down.

Paul is re-emphasizing his apostolic authority, and in doing so, is summarizing one last time his intention for writing this long letter to them. But let’s consider how we can apply what Paul says about spiritual authority more broadly because most of us have some degree of responsibility in different types of relationships, whether it is in our families, in the classroom, or in the community, at home, or perhaps in church ministry, or even in the job setting.

While talking with our interns a couple weeks ago about this issue of oversight, of leadership, a couple of them admitted that the biggest area they struggle with is exercising authority with their siblings, younger brothers and sisters, who they are suppose to care for.

Eugene Peterson’s treatment of verse 10 emphasizes this broader context quite well:

I’m writing this to you now so that when I come I won’t have to say another word on the subject. The authority the Master gave me is for putting people together, not taking them apart. I want to get on with it, and not to have to spend time on reprimands.

Paul doesn’t believe that severity or reprimands or taking people apart should be the primary approach to relationships or ministry. The result to that kind of approach is force, and the response is fear. Submission, when hammered into people’s heads, ends up being rigid and oppressive. Paul’s model for leadership, as we have seen it lived out in these letters, is not only marked by an absence of pride or arrogance, but also a lack of insecurity. As a result, he is not an intimidator. You never see Paul throwing his weight around, exercising authority just to show authority.

One attractive biblical model for leadership is that of shepherding (I’m referring to the image is one of leading sheep, not driving cattle). In a true shepherd, there is no compulsion toward arrogance, pride, or fearful insecurity, nor is there any coercion among the sheep. When any of us in spiritual leadership exercise our authority abusively, then sadly, Jesus’ lordship gets eclipsed, wiped out. And the individuals that we have responsibility for in the body of Christ end up suffering. I can’t tell you how many folks have difficulty accepting Jesus’ authority in their lives because of coercive, abusive, human authorities they have, at some point in their lives, been subjected to. But in the exercise of spiritual authority, Paul always preferred gentleness to sharpness. He valued loving over fighting whenever possible.

Eternal consequences of self-examination

There are at least three benefits to self-examination. First, it will reveal truth to us if we take it seriously. Jesus even said that truth will ultimately make us free (John 8:32). Secondly, it saves us from a hyper-critical attitude toward people around us. We will be more focused on the log in our own eye, than on the splinter in someone else's eye. And, finally, it removes a lot of the sinful debris that can clog up our lives; things that block, that stagnate the fresh flow of spiritual energy. Jesus said, "He who believes in Me... from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38).

Consider again verse 5 that we read earlier from *The Message*: "If you fail the test, do something about it." If you do not believe in Jesus as the Son of God, if you do not know him as your Lord and Savior, if you do not have an assurance of eternal life, there is something that you can do about it. In 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, Paul makes this appeal:

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain—for He says,
"AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU,
AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU";
behold, now is "THE ACCEPTABLE TIME," behold, now is "THE DAY OF SALVATION"... (2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2)

God has provided the Savior and he is saying, "here is my gift of salvation for you." There is no reason for any of us to be estranged from God because in Christ all the barriers between us have been demolished. All we need to do is step across, by faith, into God's arms. At the cross, God the Father made Jesus the Son become sin on our behalf. Jesus took our sin on himself so that we could be forgiven, cleansed of our sin, and be reconciled to God. We can be declared righteous, holy, and acceptable before God, but we must first accept Jesus' gift—his sacrificial death on our behalf.

The Bible says that Jesus Christ can indwell you. You can stand securely at the center of the circle of faith; *but, you've got to be receptive of that gift of grace*. You could believe it today. You could experience that saving faith, now.

If you know you are in the faith, if you know that Christ is in you, and if you have passed the test, don't be afraid to examine yourself and to ask these hard questions: Is my lifestyle in obedience to Jesus? Is there evidence in my life of growth and change? Do the people around me know that I belong to him? Am I committed to following God's word? Is my love for the scriptures growing deeper? Do I love God's truth more and more? Am I prayerfully optimistic about the people around me? Are my attitudes changing toward people I struggle with? Do I spend more time praying for them than I do grumbling about them? Am I getting easier to live with in my exercise of spiritual authority? Do I tend to "lord it over" people who I am responsible for, or do I understand servant authority? Am I working with people for their faith?—alongside of, rather than on top of?

I encourage you to spend some time answering these questions. Resist the temptation to rationalize, and don't give in to blaming your circumstances, your husband or wife, parents, your childhood, or your co-workers and friends. None of those things can keep you from growing spiritually. It's true that they do affect our lives, but those are issues we have to face and work through. None of us have to be stuck blaming circumstances or people for our lack of maturity or for our own

willingness to live with besetting sins in our lives. God knows our hearts. He can work in us right where we are, even amidst the struggles and confusion. But we must first be honest about the sinful patterns in our lives and our sinful attitudes.

In closing, I commend you to King David and his prayer in Psalm 51. Notice his attitude of openness; his broken, repentant heart before the Lord. This is a prayer that comes from a man that Scripture says was a man “after God’s own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). He wasn’t a perfect man, but he was an honest man before the Lord.

Hide Thy face from my sins,
And blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Thy presence,
And do not take away Thy Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation,
And sustain me with a willing spirit. (Psalm 51:10-12)

Again, I encourage you to wrestle with these questions honestly because they do have eternal consequences.

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