

**Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> September 2017**  
**The necessity of self-examination**  
**Part 1**

Hebrews 12 v 1 speaks about laying aside 'hindrances and sins' that cling so closely. Think about Barnacles on the hull of a ship, and this gives us a picture of what hindrances and sins are like. They bind fast, and have to be scraped off or else they will slow the ship and make it less maneuverable.

Another metaphor for what the author is saying is ice on the wings of a plane. If it builds up and is not dealt with, it will lead to the plane crashing – this especially relates to sin! Either way, they stick and bind, and we are commanded to cast them off.

Sounds simple so far, doesn't it? Wrong! If it was easy, a lot more people would be doing so, but it is not easy and that for many reasons. Think of how in recent decades support groups have multiplied, counseling and psychological services have multiplied, and self-help books have come and gone, and this gives us a measure of how troubled people are and how difficult we find it to cast off weights, shapes, addictions, troubled thoughts and feelings, never mind the complications of relationships and all the rest! Life is difficult, we have to get used to that, but also do something about it!

Change is not easy, yet we change all the time. As we age, each stage of life brings new and different challenges that we have to face. Some of the greatest changes come as we grow older. The empty nest syndrome, the topping out of our careers and incomes, joints that ache because we thought ourselves unbreakable in our younger days, loss of parents, then relations, then friends, and then there are illnesses and the passing of our spouses. These are big changes that come to all. The only question is in what direction will we change? Will we become more holy, more Christ-like, or will we become something else?

We are reminded by the Heroes of faith that there are a multitudes of Christians who have gone out on a journey, a pilgrimage with God to holiness and heaven. They have succeeded and completed their journey. It was brief for some, and long, and at times rough and costly for others, but they all completed their journeys and increased in stature, not worn out and diminished. They were ordinary people like us when they set out, but became people that God was pleased and delighted in because they became more Christ-like as they went on the journey. Think of Paul's wonderful statement that he had run his race, he had finished his course. Imagine being able to say that!

The hindrances to our pilgrimage of faith are the weights and sins that cling so closely, and we are to cast them off. However, before we can cast things off, we need to know what weights and sins we carry, and this is where self-examination comes in.

Before I go any further, let me paint you a picture, and present a metaphor. Think of a

girls wedding day. The girl is deeply in love with her boy. She is in her room preparing for the wedding which is to take place in a few hours. What does she do? Does she pull out the jeans and jersey she wore yesterday to work, and run a comb through her hair and get a quick spray of deodorant under each arm and set out for her wedding? Very few, if any, would do that in our country. On the contrary, she spends time on her hair and skin and make up. She has a dress which she has taken pains over and all the rest. Her desire is to be as beautiful on the day for the one she loves as she can be. Her motivation of taking such care is love. She wants to overwhelm her beloved by her beauty and ravish his heart, because his love has ravished her heart.

That is in some way the totality of the description of the Christians pilgrimage to holiness. We seek to become spiritually beautiful for the One who loves us out of love for Him. As the Apostle John says, 'we love him because He first loved us.' The journey is not a drag and a burden, because we are traveling with Christ, the one who loves us and whom we love. Co-operating in the process of sanctification – being made holy, being made clean, is a response of love for Christ, and that is why it is important, and that is why we are to apply ourselves to the process.

In the next couple of talks I want to consider a number of matters.

1. To show that self-examination is required of a Christian.
2. That it is a difficult work to do, and why this is so.
3. Self-examination is required under two heads:
  - (a) As regards to duties due to God and,
  - (b) As regards duties due to others.
4. The practice of Self-examination
5. Application

Essentially these two heads correspond to the Great Commandment. Mark 12 v 29 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and the second is, love your neighbor as yourself.'

Today, we will consider points 1 and 2.

1. To demonstrate that this work is required of all Christians.

The Bible requires this of us. 2 Corinthians 13 v 5 tells us to examine and test ourselves to see if we are in the faith. 1 Corinthians 11 v 28 tells us to examine ourselves before we take the Lord's Supper. Other Scriptures put a different slant on the matter. David in Psalm 139 v 23-24, asks God to search him, because he can't see himself clearly or see what lies out of his sight behind his back and deep in his heart! Ephesians 4 v 22-24 tells us that we are to put off our old lives and put on the new. We are to change our coats, our skins and our hearts!

It is very important that we realise that this is Gods will for us and His requirement for us. In the Old Testament days, the prophets frequently rebuked the people for failing to

change in heart and life. Not only is a failure to grow and change an affront to God, but it is very dangerous. If there is no growth in grace, how do we know that we are actually true believers at all? Ephesians 1 v4 tells us that God's intention for us is to make us holy and blameless. This is a serious matter. If there is no holiness in us, how do we know that we are actually Christians? If there is no difference between Christians and non-Christians, why should any-one take any interest in Christ? This is very much where most of the Church in the west is. We have magnificent buildings, but we live like every-one else, the same sins, concerns and behavior. I suppose that the reading of Christian biographies would sober us up, but perhaps not many people have an appetite for good Christian biography, because, by and large, we need to look at old biographies to see true Christian qualities, and such can be quaint to our reckoning!

Failure to grow in holiness is an affront to Christ because He went to the Cross to procure a salvation for us that was sufficient to perfect us. Failure to make anything of it is like throwing out a present that someone has worked and sacrificed to buy us!

Finally, Paul says in Ephesians 4.17 that we must not live like unbelievers do. There are many other admonitions to holiness and growth in the Bible. Paul speaking to the Corinthians addresses them as spiritual babies who still had to be fed on milk, because they had not grown up to be fit for solid food.

2. That self-examination is a difficult work to do and why this is so.

Let us go back to the picture of the bride preparing herself for her wedding. She can look in the mirror to see how she looks and how her hair and makeup are on her front side. However unless she has another mirror angled so as she can see her back, she does not know if everything is as she would desire. When it comes to self-examination, the Scripture is the mirror. James says that the Word is a mirror, but we have to listen and obey it.

The seeing of what is not visible to us, our backs, is like the depths of our hearts which none of us can fathom, only God can do so, and it is here that the difficulties become even more so. James tells us that we are prone to seeing ourselves in the mirror of God's word, but then going off and forgetting it, how much more difficult then, to look into our own hearts?

In Psalm 139 v 23-24, David says, 'Search me O god, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.'

David was concerned not only with open sin in his life, but also the hidden sin of his heart. We also should be so concerned!

Many of us live with sins and we don't know it, how can this happen when God has laid down instruction in His Word? There are many reasons, for example:

3.

(1) Because of the deceitfulness of sin that blinds us. Sin is spiritual darkness. Things that are clear in the light become uncertain or unseen as darkness closes in. Sin blinds us to its presence, which is sin's deceitfulness. The more we commit a sin, the 'smaller' it becomes in our reckoning. That is the point of the last verses of Romans 1. Sin in an individual or a people will become accepted and after that promoted!

In this regard, the more we sin, the more our wills are inclined towards it. Psalm 1 speaks of walking, standing and sitting. As we continue in any sin, we will end up sitting with it quite comfortably! By this stage, we have rationalized our sin, everyone else does it, nobody knows what we are doing, and we have been made hard to the fact that God knows! It is because we are so full of sin that we find it difficult to pass a true judgment on our condition.

(2) Because of Satan who joins with our deceitful desires to blind and deceive us to our condition. Satan is ever active to do this. He did it with Adam and Eve, and it is a tactic which has served him well, so he continues to use it against every generation of Christians. Think of how long David did not recognize his sin with Bathsheba!

(3) Sometimes we don't see our sinful ways because they are so deeply ingrained in us that we think that this is just the way we are!

(4) Sometimes we excuse ourselves because so many other people do this. If the others are Christians, or clever or powerful people we think that this is proof that our sin is acceptable and no sin at all.

(5) We often think that if we are Christian in this aspect or that, that that will cover us. However God demands that we obey in every aspect. We cannot trade one good act off against a bad one, or say that we are not as bad as another, or better than many!

An Objection.

At this point some may be thinking that this self-examination is a dreary and depressing notion. Why would we desire to do this, it is all negative and would drag us down.

We do have a fear of negativity today, we all want to be happy, and most of our attention is focused on personal appearance, and personal reputation in the eyes of other people. These are essentially completely superficial values, and are more destructive than all the spiritual self-examination we could do. So many today live in fear of not fitting in to society and not having the admired look that the celebrities and self-publicists present. I would argue that these are infinitely more likely to cause depression than spiritual self-examination.

I do so because of v 2 of Hebrews 12. – 'let us fix our eyes on Jesus...' This is the method of self-examination. We look at ourselves with one eye always on Jesus. We look to Christ on the Cross, and Christ exalted in glory. There are no more positive

views than these – Christ triumphantly crying out, ‘It is finished’, as He dies on the Cross so dealing the death blow to our sin – we are really being asked to root out what Christ has already mortally wounded. Also Christ ascended to the right hand of God, where we are to come, and have already come in Christ. This is where Christians are headed for, to know the full Salvation that has been accomplished in Christ's death, and to be perfected in Him and with Him in heaven – why would we not want to get rid of everything in us that hinders our progress to this realization now on earth and then perfectly in heaven?

Self-examination is not an exercise in belly-button gazing, though it can be corrupted into this. Nor is it a recipe for depression and grief. It is as if we are standing back to back with our big brother – Christ – to see how we have grown, and resolving to eat our greens to grow up, even if greens are not our favourite! It is like trying on our big brother's football boots and thinking that these will soon fit us, it is a positive work to do.

I cannot leave it here without some form of application to keep us until next week. The first step, the necessary tool in self-examination is the Scripture. Let me encourage you to get a real Bible, one that is a good translation and not a paraphrased version. Let me encourage you to read it, to bring it to church and follow the readings of the day. Go home today and read Psalm 1 and ask yourself what it means to ‘meditate on it day and night,’ and to think about the benefit promised – to be like a fruitful tree planted by water. The first tool of examination is the Scripture, and we use it by actually reading it and meditating upon it. Meditation means that we think about what we have read. We don't just read it and close the book, but we start to spend some time in it!

That is the starting point in growing in holiness. To be quite frank, if we are rarely in the Scriptures, then we are guaranteeing ourselves a stunted growth if any growth at all! It matters how we read the book. Word and Holy Spirit must be together, but more of that next week. For now, open the book, and begin to read it. Mark is a good place to start, the shorter of the Gospels, punchy, concise sentences, and a start to having our eyes fixed on Jesus.