

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup>. September 2017  
Self-examination  
Part 2.

Last time I tried to establish two things.

Firstly that we are commanded and required to engage in self-examination.

Secondly, that to do so is a difficult work to do, and why this is so.

I also stressed that the work of self-examination must be done with one eye on Christ, who is the Christians hope, and one eye on ourselves.

The purpose of self-examination is not to engage in navel gazing for its own sake, but is one aspect of preparing ourselves in holiness. The metaphor I used was the Bride who prepares herself for her wedding day. Her desire is to present herself to her husband in beauty so as to ravish his heart and take his breath away. The motivation for this is love of the Bridegroom, who loves her, and her preparation is a response to that love, not a hardship or a chore!

So with Christ. We love Him because He first loved us, and our desire is to please Him and be beautiful for Him. Spiritual beauty is holiness, which is to be like Christ in character and heart.

I am altering the order of the next three points from last week. So now the order is –

4. The practice of Self-examination

3. Self-examination is required under two heads:

(a) As regards to duties due to God and,

(b) As regards duties due to others.

5. Application

4. The practice of self-examination.

How do we do this? We are desiring to discover as indicated in Hebrews 12 v 1 what hindrances and sins we carry. These two things slow us in the race of Christian living, the pilgrimage to holiness and then heaven. We are seeking to discover what things, thoughts and actions cling to us, and keep us back from growing in the Christian life? So, what do we do?

There is a line of thought that says that we become holy, sanctified, in the same way that we are justified, that is by faith alone. We are justified as a free gift of God's grace by faith, and this changes everything as regards our relationship with God. By faith we receive the grace of God which declares and writes down on our account, that we are made right with God, our sin forgiven, and our standing changed. We are declared by God to be not guilty because of the work of Christ on the Cross. This is written to our account the moment we believe and receive Christ. The argument goes that we are sanctified in the same way, purely by the grace of God, and all we have to do is believe and let go, and let God.

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Now, every step in the Christian life is by faith, but while we play no part in the work that justifies us, we do have a responsibility when it comes to sanctification, our being made holy in practice, in heart, head, and living. Think of it this way if you can. Imagine that someone buys you a life time membership of a gym. When this is given to you, you have access to the gym, and no-one can chase you out. However, no matter how much time you spend sitting in the gym, looking at the diagrams of what muscles each machine exercises, and no matter how many times you read the body building book, unless you actually use the machines, and lift the weights, nothing will happen! This is how it is with sanctification. Justification is like the gift of access to the gym, but we have to do something to get fit or strong, we have to use the machines, so in sanctification, we have to co-operate with God.

Now let's clarify it a bit. It is not the machine itself that builds the muscle, our bodies do that, so there is a bit that we do intentionally, but our bodies get stronger by a process of growth which is outside of our ability to will or do. This is like sanctification. We do our bit, but it is God who builds the holiness. It is in this way that faith is active in sanctification, but it also involves us in doing something. No one gets holy by osmosis. No matter how long I sit on the Bible, or sleep with it under my pillow, it will not have any effect on me, I will not become holy!

Perhaps by now you are wondering how we do this, as something which seemed straight forward enough before you read this, now appears more complicated!

Think back to another metaphor I used last week. Do you remember how I used the picture of the youngest child standing back to back with the older brother to see where the younger measure up to? That is a metaphor for self-examination, we are to see how we measure up to Christ, and He is the standard, the pattern and the means of our growth. Hebrews 12 v 2 speaks of Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, so He is the pioneer of our faith, and the one who has finished the journey as the pathfinder. He is the one we are to examine ourselves by.

Just as a younger child does not need to be disheartened that he is still shorter than the big brother, so we need not be discouraged by self-examination. We are to look to Christ v12 says, and there is an implicit promise in every command of God. When God says we are to grow up, to cast off hindrances and sin, that we must be holy, that we are to grow up to be like Christ and to follow after Him all our lives, implicit in this is a promise that this is possible. These commands are His will, and God will act with all His might to have all these accomplished in our lives. God is at work in us to will and to do! When we are measured against our bigger brother, it is with the confident expectation that we will discover that we have grown, and that we will grow still more! This should encourage us, not dishearten us!

We may however be impatient! When I was about 6 years old, if I was asked what I wanted for Christmas, my answer was a Canadian Felling Axe. I didn't get one until I was about 15. However, my Dad did buy me a small cast iron hatchet when I was 6.

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I remember the day so well. After the purchase, we as a family went to a farm where my Dad was to cost a building project. I asked what I could do while he was working, and the farmer said, I now realise as a joke, 'Why don't you go and cut down that tree.' Guess what? By the time they came back, I was well through the tree, much to the shock of all concerned, except me! Sometimes we have to be patient as we grow up in Christ, it is a life time of growth, not one mighty leap! We have to grow to be able to handle the graces God gives. We don't get everything at once or else we might cut down too many trees and do too much damage!

Turn to Psalm 119 and read verse 9. It starts with a question, 'How can a young man keep his way pure?' The word pure means blameless, clean, pure, innocent, in other words, holy, free from hindrance and sin. A young man, in the vigor of youth, is a hearty and passionate being, full of hormones and all the rest. If we can find what will work for such vibrant lives, it will serve for those of us who are past the wildness of youth!

What is the advice? 'To walk in the law of the Lord' – a life directed and shaped by the Word. The potter shapes the clay on the wheel by the pressure of his fingers. Christ shapes us in the same way, but the means is the Word. The Scriptures are the revelation of God. Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3 v 16 & 17, that, 'All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' It is by the Scriptures that we stand back to back with Christ so that we can see how we are doing.

However, if we do not open the book and read it, then none of this will happen. It is not only that we read the Bible that matters, but how we do it. The Pharisees were experts on the text of the Bible, but in John 5 v39-40 Jesus says this regarding them. 'You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.' The Pharisees studied, but the Bible was a closed book to them, so reading is not enough in itself, but is the starting point.

It is good to read big chunks of the Bible to become aware of the history and the characters written about, but it is only the beginning. There was a man years ago in Belfast who if you gave him a Bible reference, could quote what it said. He did this to get people to buy him pints! The knowledge he had of the Bible probably did him no good, so what is required goes beyond a bare knowledge. Paul says about the Scriptures in 2Corinthians 3 v 6 that, 'the letter kills', that is knowledge alone, 'but the Spirit gives life' This verse is not setting Scripture and the Spirit in opposition, but it means that the Word and the Spirit must always be together so that the Word gives life, not only knowledge. Word and Spirit working together brings illumination, light into our hearts and minds.

This is what happens when we read the word as Psalm 1 v 2 instructs us. We are to meditate on it. This means to think about it, to ask ourselves questions about it and

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what it tells us about God, ourselves or the world. Is there a command to be obeyed, a practice and discipline to adopt, a truth to believe, an instruction to give thanks for and act upon? These are the sorts of things we should think about when we read a passage of Scripture. If we think that there is nothing there for us, then move on and read until something does strike us.

When we do this with as much sincerity as we can, and with attention, then this is when the Word we read is acted upon by the Spirit, and it suddenly becomes a living word bursting with promise and hope and correction if needed.

The response to seeing something in the Bible is then to turn it into prayer. For example, take Psalm 1. This Psalm is about two people, the righteous and the wicked and the fate of each. One is like chaff in God's estimation, the other is like a tree planted by water. Which sort of person do we desire to be? If we desire to be righteous, then ask ourselves where we stand as regards the first three verses. Do we listen to godless advice, or godly. If we are heavily influenced by the advice of worldly people, then our response can be to ask forgiveness for listening to people more than God. We can then ask God to give us grace to change the way we live, and who we are influenced by. We will have to do this more than once in our lives, because it takes growth to be able to stand against the strong winds of others opinions, and growth takes time.

Look at the promise for those who do as is advised. V 3 is a promise of life and strength and dignity and fruitfulness, fruit that God likes. If we produce fruit that delights God, will He not bless us and delight us? In this way we learn, we are molded, and we grow.

3. Self-examination is required under two heads:

- (a) As regards to duties due to God and,
- (b) As regards duties due to others.

I do not have space to cover this in any great way, but just to give some pointers as the Bible is full of such material.

(a) Duties due to God.

These are the qualities of Christ that God says we are to be saturated with, a vision of what we are to become. The Sermon on the Mount is an important passage. The Beatitudes are in essence a description of the character of Christ. These are very searching qualities that tend to be very different from what non-Christians value. I have never seen a job description that asks for any of these qualities. 'Wanted a hero. Must be meek and hunger and thirst after righteousness.'

However, read Hebrews 11 and notice that all the heroes of faith mentioned there may not have started out as meek and hungering and thirsting for righteousness, but that is what they became. The qualities of Character in the Beatitudes are worthy of being visited and revisited again and again to see how well we are growing up to be like Christ

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our elder brother. Meditate on them, pray about them, and confess our faults and sins. Ask ourselves what we cling onto, which then become hindrances to us. It is also worth mentioning that what is a hindrance may become a sin as we grow up if not cast off. Let me give you an example. It is wonderful to see a child be confident and brave to try this or that. However if the man remains confident, it can turn to pride and self-sufficiency.

The Bible contains many instruction of the things that God wants us to fill our lives with and lessons to learn. There are devotional duties, such as I am talking about now, Bible reading, meditation and prayer. There are other things as well that are disciplines that will facilitate our growth in God. These include things like silence and fasting, giving thanks, praising God and worship. Giving is also important, and spending time with other Christians. There is a whole Bible full of things that God wants us to engage with so that we will grow up in Christlikeness. There is so much, that in this life time we will only be beginning to get to grips with it!

(b) Duties due to our neighbour.

This is how we live our faith in the world. In the book of Ephesians, from chapter 5 forwards, Paul addresses this issue as regards home, husbands and wives, children and parents, then employer and employee. Did you know that the Bible has an instruction not to pilfer from our employers? In the 1945 Revival in Belfast, there was such a change in the thinking of the converted ship yard workers that the yard had to open up two warehouses to receive the returned tools which had been pinched by the men before they became Christians. Now that is change!

Once again, the Bible contains many instructions about how we are to live as Christians with people who are nice to us, who hate us, who persecute us, and who despise us. There are things about how not to express anger, how we are not to seek revenge, but leave that as God's prerogative. Can you imagine how a community of people would be if the desire for revenge was given up? The duties God requires are very demanding, but if we truly love God because He has loved us first, we will engage with these things and stand back to back with them and see how much we have grown, and how much more there is by God's grace to grow.

## 5. Application

There is a danger in all this. If we look at ourselves other than with an eye on Christ, we will either become discouraged at how unlike Christ we are, or else we will become puffed up comparing ourselves with the worst of people about us, rather than looking at ourselves through the lens of Christ.

If we were to look at the admonitions contained in the earlier chapters of Hebrews, without seeing that every command also has an implied promise that God will work this in us as we respond, we will be very scared and feel that we will never measure up. We need to understand the unchangeable nature of being justified. God will never cease loving the believer, but that does not mean that He will not give us strong medicine to

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cure our serious faults and sins. If we were diagnosed with a life threatening condition would we want the doctors to do what would cure us, or just give us an aspirin? God is committed to us becoming holy, so He will do what needs to be done, and he expects the same from us.

However, that is only one side of the cure. Read Hosea 2v14 forward.

'Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her.....'

Can you see the tenderness of these words? Look at Isaiah 40 v 11.

'He tends his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.'

Then there is this in Matthew 11 v 28.

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.'

There is goodness and severity in God, there is forthright requirement and gentleness for those on the path, even if we have not yet gone far. Let me quote you a stanza from Tersteegen.

'Gently loosens He thy hold  
Of the former treasured things-  
Loves and joys which were of old,  
Shapes to which the spirit clings-  
And alone, alone He stands,  
Stretching forth beseeching hands.'

This is the gentleness of the motherly hand.

To conclude, we are to engage in self-examination, but to do so through the lens of Christ.

The task is difficult because we have such high opinions of ourselves and unrealistic views of ourselves because of the littleness of our knowledge of God and the greatness of the influence of sinfulness in us. None of us naturally see ourselves as hopeless sinners!

Self-examination is the process of applying the Scriptures to our lives to see our true condition, our failings and sins. By using the Scripture we also see the promises of God and His provision for our growth in grace. In this way, no matter how low our condition is, we have hope and grounds to believe that we will change.

This is a life-long process, and if we look at ourselves by looking at Christ as revealed in the Word and by the Spirit, then we will be changed in heart, mind and soul. God looks at the grace He has placed in us, not at the multitudes of our failings. We fall and stumble, but if our desire is to stand and walk, then just as a parent does not despise his child's attempts to start walking, so God will not despise our stumbling progress.

Someone once said that an unexamined life is a life not worth living. How sad, and how terrible it will be if we come to the end of our lives and discover that we have been living

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in presumption. May this learning to examine ourselves keep us from being told by Christ to depart from Him because he never knew us. Rather, may we be like those addressed in 2 Peter 1 v 10-11 to whom he says, 'Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.'