

It is Time for Your Annual *Spiritual* Checkup

On January 27th I will be having my annual physical checkup. At that checkup my doctor will check my vision, my hearing, my lungs, my reflexes, my pulse and my blood pressure. He performs an EKG to see how my heart is working.

He concludes with some blood work so he can check cholesterol levels, kidney function, electrolyte levels, white blood cell count and stuff like that.

Now I don't particularly enjoy physicals, especially the blood work part, but I submit to them yearly because if there is something wrong, I want to address it. I want to be as healthy as I can be, for as long as I can be.

As important as our physical health is, our spiritual health is even more important. The Apostle Paul put it this way in 1 Timothy chapter 4.

8 for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

1 Timothy 4:8

In other words, your present spiritual health not only has implications for the here and now, it has implications in eternity.

Determining whether someone is physically healthy is fairly straightforward. We compare their physical stats against some

baseline stats that the medical community tells us represents a person of good health.

For example, doctors tell us that a good baseline blood pressure for someone who is 25 years old is somewhere around 120/80. If you deviate much from that baseline, either the systolic or diastolic number, then the doctor gets concerned, and so should you.

But how do you go about determining a person's spiritual health? The answer is not as difficult as you might think. Jot this down.

You are a spiritually healthy *if* you are united with Jesus Christ by faith and are becoming more Christ-like in how you think and in how you behave.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, most of us have an annual *physical checkup*. But when is the last time you had a *spiritual checkup*?

Well, if you have been a member of our church for a while you know that we schedule a regular spiritual checkup for you every year about this time.

In fact, I have scheduled an appointment for you today! Welcome to my office!

Let me begin my examination with a question:

ARE YOU MAKING PROGRESS IN YOUR SPIRITUAL WALK?

As you compare where you are now, with where you were this time last year, have you made positive progress? Have you become more like Christ this past year? And if so, in what specific ways?

To help us in our spiritual checkup, I want to set forth five questions that will help you evaluate your spiritual progress.

Let's see how you've done. Are you ready?

Question number one...

And this one gets right to the heart of the matter...

1. Is your thirst to know God greater today than it was this time last year?

When I think about this question, my mind immediately goes to the book of Psalms, because there you see the heart of someone who thirsts for God.

As a genre of literature, you might think of Psalms as someone's personal diary, set to music.

Psalms 42 opens with these words,

1 As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.

2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

Psalm 42:1-2

And in Psalm 63 we read,

- 1 O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, In a dry and weary land where there is no water.
- 2 Thus I have seen You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory.
- 3 Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips will praise You.
- 4 So I will bless You as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name.
- 5 My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth offers praises with joyful lips.

Psalm 63:1-5

When I read passages like that, I ask myself...

"Doug, do you thirst for God like that? Do you have an unquenchable desire to know God more intimately, or has your walk with God grown stale and complacent.

Are you actively pursuing God, or are you just going through the motions?

When it comes to having a burning desire to know God more intimately, another great example for us is the Apostle Paul.

Despite his obvious spiritual maturity, and privileged spiritual experiences, in a letter he wrote toward the end of his life he wrote,

"I want to know Christ..." (Phil. 3:10).

The first time I read that passage I remember thinking to myself,

"What in the world is he talking about? Didn't Paul know Christ better than most of us ever will?"

And the answer is, "Of course he did!" But the more Paul got to know Jesus, the more he wanted to know him! The more he progressed in his spiritual walk, the thirstier he became!

Is that your experience? Do you have a growing desire to know Christ better? Do you yearn to experience more of his grace and love?

If so, that is a sure sign that you are growing as a Christian.

And if not, that may be an indication that you've gotten off track somewhere. You have gotten distracted from pursuing the most important relationship in your life. It can happen so easily.

In a letter he wrote to the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul lamented,

3 But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.

2 Corinthians 11:3

- How thirsty are you to know God better?
- How is your devotional life?

Now let me stop right here, and make something very clear.

My goal is not to make you feel guilty. God's love for you, and his commitment to you is not affected by how you answer the questions we are considering today.

If you are a Christian, the Bible is very clear that you have a standing in grace before God. For you, there is no condemnation. Your standing before God as his beloved child is secure.

However, you need to realize that God created you to know Him. He wants to reveal himself to you in deeper and deeper ways. But He won't force himself on you. It is up to you to pursue him.

Jesus said,

"Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

Matthew 5:6

James tells us,

8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

James 4:8

If you pursue God, He will draw near to you. He will satisfy your thirst to know him. He promises to do so!

Let's continue our spiritual checkup with a second question.

Question number 2 is...

2. Are you more loving today than you were a year ago?

You will recall that someone once came to Jesus and asked,

36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Matthew 22:36

It is interesting to me what he didn't say. He didn't say,

- "Faithfully attend church every week."
- "Join a small group."
- "Give generously to your local church."

- "Pray without ceasing"
- "Read your Bible daily."

- "Serve in the ministries of your local church"
- "Treat others the way you want to be treated."

He didn't say any of those things. It is not that those things aren't good and important. They are.

But they are not "all important." They are not inclusive enough. Do you remember how Jesus responded?

37 And He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

38 "This is the great and foremost commandment.

39 "The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

40 "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

Matthew 22:37-40

All of our Christian duty can be summed up in these two commandments...

1. Love God
2. Love your neighbor as yourself

Now we all know this, but the question is, do we really live it out?

What would it look like if we did live it out? We find some help in the 13th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. There he describes the qualities that issue forth from someone who is truly loving.

Now as I read this familiar passage...I want you to think about your day to day interactions with others, especially with those who are closest to you. Do you consistently respond to them in the ways the Bible describes here?

4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant,

5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered,

6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;

7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never fails...

1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Based upon this passage, we might ask ourselves some questions.

- Can you point to some specific areas where you are more patient today than you were a year ago?
- Are you more kind?
- Are you less jealous of other's success?
- Are you growing in humility?

- Do you frequently sacrifice your preferences, your plans, your rights, or your expectations, for the benefit of others?
- Are you slow to anger and quick to forgive?
- Are you consistently gracious toward others?
- Are you longsuffering when it comes to offenses committed against you?
- Are you growing in your ability to trust God in the difficult circumstances of life?
- Do you have a growing hope in God and a diminishing hope in the things of this world?

Let me ask it this way: Would your friends, your spouse, your children, your co-workers say that these qualities are apparent and growing in your life?

If, so, then you are clearly making spiritual progress in your walk with God.

But if you are stalled in selfishness, then you're stuck spiritually and you need to make some changes.

GOD WILL HELP YOU MAKE THOSE CHANGES if you will repent of your lack of love and allow God to love others through you.

There is a third question we need to consider as we undergo our spiritual checkup.

3. Are you governed more and more by God's Word?

Listen. You will never grow much as a Christian, apart from a regular intake of God's Word. It won't happen.

Jesus once said,

4 ... 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'

Matthew 4:4

Think about the central role the Bible plays in the lives of Christ's followers.

- It is from the Bible that we develop an accurate portrait of who *God* is, and what he is like.
- It is from the Bible that we get an accurate picture of who God created us to be, and how all of that went wrong.
- It is from the Bible that we discover God's plan to forgive us by sending his Son into the world to be our Savior.
- It is from the Bible that we learn how we are to lovingly relate to one another.
- It is from the Bible that we sync our value system to God's
 -
 - ✓ what's right and what is wrong
 - ✓ what's good and what is bad
 - ✓ what's loving and what's unloving
 - ✓ what's appropriate and what's inappropriate
 - ✓ what's eternally significant and what's merely of temporal importance.
- It is from the Bible that we gain wisdom for living.

I love Psalm 119:99. Here David writes,

99 I have more insight than all my teachers, For Your testimonies are my meditation.

100 I understand more than the aged, Because I have observed Your precepts.

Psalm 119:99-100

Do you want to be wise beyond your years and educational level? Spend time in God's Word, and you will be!

And so I ask you again: "Are you governed more and more by God's Word?"

As you look over this past year, can you point to any changes in your life which have resulted from your personal study of God's Word? If so, then you are making spiritual progress. And if not, not so much!

Ok, there is a fourth question I'd like you to consider as we continue our spiritual checkup. It is this...

4. Are you more and more willing to forgive others?

In Ephesians 4:32 we read these challenging words,

32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Ephesians 4:32

Forgiveness is one of the hardest and most unnatural things we could be asked to do. But the more we become like Christ, who forgave even those who nailed him to a cross, the more we will be willing to forgive those who have wronged us.

One thing I have learned over the years is this: An unwillingness to forgive others will stunt your spiritual growth and lead you down the path of bitterness.

In a book entitled, "When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense," Dr. Robert Jeffress argues that when you harbor unforgiveness towards someone, you are emotionally tied to them.

That's especially true if you demand repentance or remorse or rehabilitation of the offender. It is like the old three legged race. You can't run forwards faster than your comrade is willing to travel.

But by extending unconditional forgiveness to those who have hurt you, you can cut the emotional cord that binds you together and is encumbering your spiritual progress.

When you release another person from his or her offense, you are saying,

"I no longer wish to be emotionally tied to you. Whether you repent or not is between you and God. I'm ready to move on with my life, and so I release you of any obligation to me."

Christian counselor and author Chuck Lynch illustrates the benefits of unconditional forgiveness by relating the story of one of his clients, a woman named Amber who was molested by her grandfather when she was a little girl.

As an adult, Amber realized that if she was going to move forward in life, she needed to extend to her grandpa the same kind of unconditional forgiveness God had extended to her.

I would like to read a portion of the letter she wrote to him.

Dear Grandpa,

I want you to know that I am on a spiritual journey, working toward inner healing with the Lord Jesus in my heart. But I am having trouble in the area of the things you did to me when I was a little girl. So, through my struggle to help me move on in my healing, I want to give you a gift, the most special gift I could give to you.

That gift, Grandpa, is forgiveness. I want to explain to you what kind of forgiveness it is. My gift of forgiveness to you is for all the violations done against me by you when I was growing up. I will explain.

I want to forgive you for violating me for your own pleasure. I want to forgive you for the mistrust you developed in me,

training me not to let anyone be too close to me for fear of being hurt. I want to forgive you for making me feel so ashamed when I did nothing wrong.

I want to forgive you for the anger you developed inside me towards you. I want to forgive you for the hate and fear of men that you instilled in me, even towards my dad, whom I now love with all my heart.

I want to forgive you and release you for instilling insecurity in me, which I still struggle with. But I am coming to realize that I am someone whom God made special and have a purpose to fulfill in this world for the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to forgive you and release you for shattering my dreams for a happy marriage with someone to really love me. You changed me from what I really was to someone I didn't know, and I didn't understand what was happening to me.

But I have faith that through all of this, with God by my side, there is someone special out there for me who will understand what I have gone through and will love me regardless.

The most important thing I want to forgive you and release you for is the distorted picture of God you gave me. I blamed Him for the sin you were committing, which was not His fault.

Grandpa, now that I have completed this part of the journey and transferred you over to the Lord through forgiveness, I want to make a promise in my heart that I will never bring this up against you again.

It is time to draw this letter to a close and say good-bye. Now that I feel better about myself and can accept what has happened to me, I can really say I know what it means to love you through the eyes of the Lord.

Love,

Your Granddaughter Amber

Wow...forgiveness is a powerful gift, isn't it? It is perhaps the greatest gift you can give someone.

So let me ask you...when it comes to this whole area of forgiveness, how are you doing? Are you still bitter at someone who offended you in the past? Are you holding on to that hurt?

God wants you to forgive them. Remember, God want us to forgive just as we ourselves have been forgiven by God. In fact, in Matthew 6:15 Jesus said,

15 "But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

Matthew 6:15

So I ask you again. Have you forgiven any longtime hurts during the past year? If so, then you have made a measurable advance in Christian maturity.

There is one more question I would like you to consider as we conclude our spiritual exam.

5. Are you becoming more and more aware of your sin?

Towards the end of his life the Apostle Paul made an incredible statement. He said,

¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners -- of whom I am the worst.

1 Timothy 1:15

How could the godly Apostle Paul say something like that? He could say that because the truth is, the further you progress in walk with Christ, the more aware you become of your sin and your selfishness.

As you progress in your faith, you come to see that sin is not limited to your actions. It's much deeper than that. It's tied up with our motives and inner desires—you know, why we do what we do.

James pinpoints the source of much of our relational struggles. He says,

¹What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?

²You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.

James 4:1-2

What do you call that? Selfishness. We want what we want when we want it, and when we don't get it, we get all bent out of shape. And we take out our anger and frustration on those who are foolhardy enough to block our goals.

When we do that, we are demonstrating that we care more about satisfying our selfish desires than we do about loving others. And that is a problem.

My point is this: If we are going to continue to grow in Christlikeness, we have to be sensitive to sin at the desire and motive level, not just at the behavioral level.

I don't know about you, but God is always putting his finger on something in my life that he wants me to deal with.

How about you?? Are you more sensitive to sin today than you were this time last year? How you answer that question will tell you a lot about your spiritual direction.

Review

Ok, let's review. As part of our spiritual checkup, I've suggested that we ask ourselves five questions to help us determine whether or not we are growing in Christlikeness.

There are other questions we could ask, but these will give us a pretty good idea of how we are doing.

Let's review them quickly:

1. Is your thirst to know God greater today than it was this time last year?
2. Are you more loving today than you were a year ago?
3. Are you governed more and more by God's Word?
4. Are you more willing to forgive others?
5. Are you becoming more aware of your sin?

Conclusion

Now remember, these questions aren't intended to make you feel guilty. If you can't answer a single question positively, God doesn't love you any less, but like any good parent, he wants you to grow.

But growth in Christlikeness doesn't happen automatically. It has to be intentionally pursued.

I really believe that without discipline and occasional evaluation, the natural drift of your life will be away from Christlikeness, rather than toward it.

That is true for all of us.

And so, as we begin a new year, let me encourage you to discipline yourself to cultivate those spiritual disciplines that will help you grow in Christlikeness.

I'm thinking of disciplines like:

- Worship— expressing gratitude to God for his greatness, mercy, love and provision.
- Regular personal Bible study with an emphasis on application
- Prayer (Just talking with God throughout the day)
- Serving God by serving others
- Giving generously and sacrificially out of your God given resources to help others.

If you will cultivate these disciplines in your life, you will grow spiritually. And this time next year, you will see marked progress in the five areas we have looked at today.

- You will have a growing thirst to know God better.
- You will be more loving toward others.
- Your life will be more aligned with God's will.
- You will be quicker to forgive others because you will be more aware of your own ongoing need to be forgiven by God.