



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Taking a Personal Spiritual Checkup

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1 Corinthians 11:27-34

Romans 12:1-3

An annual checkup, we're all supposed to have them: be it for your house or your car, your finances or your health. We all are supposed to have an annual checkup. Well, what about your spiritual health? When was the last time you had a personal spiritual checkup?

I know there are some who think that an annual appearance in worship at Christmas or at Easter constitutes an 'annual spiritual', but there is more to it than that.

Paul writes to the Corinthians that they should "examine themselves..." before taking communion.

The early Christians would have the Eucharistic meal every time they gathered, and he's suggesting this personal checkup.

I don't know if you know but this examination before communion became a Session responsibility in the Presbyterian church. Members would come before the Session, and the Session would examine each one as to their worthiness for taking communion. And if they were deemed worthy, they were given a token to present to the Elders showing that they had passed the examination.

I served a church in Canton, Mississippi that was founded back in the 1830s, and they had their Session minutes going all the way back to then. And up until the late 19th, early 20th century, the Session of this church was conducting those communion examinations. You can read in the minutes, "So-and-so will be denied communion until he changes his

drinking habits, having been found drunk in public on several occasions.”

I can't say why the church stopped this custom, and I'm not advocating its return. But I do think Paul's admonition for a personal spiritual examination is good for you and me. Our text this morning from his letter to the Romans is the summary statement of the outcome of that examination: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, to God which is your spiritual worship.”

And when Paul is talking about our bodies, it's not a matter of tummy tucks or hair loss or spare tires we carry; it's all a matter of life, real life, our thoughts and words and deeds of daily living that are given to God.

The sermon today is, in essence, urging an ‘annual spiritual’: A checkup of the state of our spiritual health as we begin this new year, a time for us to evaluate our spiritual health and take whatever steps are needed for our continual spiritual well-being.

One of the challenges of our time is that many of our people have no awareness of their need for spiritual health. “Our task,” said the great Jewish scholar, Abraham Heschel, “is to bring God back into the world, into our lives. To worship is to expand the presence of God in the world.”

So when Paul talks about ‘presenting our bodies...which is our spiritual worship’, he is talking about giving to God that which belongs to God - us, you and me, alive and well, an active life in the world for God.

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That's the Great Commission Jesus gave to us, "Go into the world, teaching them all I've commanded you...." What Paul is saying to the Corinthians and Romans and to you and me, "If you are going to work for the great commission, you need a spiritual checkup."

So what do we check? I have three words for you to build on for your checkup: Confession, Conflict, Compassion. Good numbers, low numbers, bad numbers, high numbers?

First of all: **CONFESSION**: Any unconfessed sins in your life? Is your unconfessed sin level low or high? It's a little overwhelming when you think about it, isn't it? There could be so many!

Our actions and our inaction involve sin. We did some things we should not have done; we failed to do some things we should have done. When we've substituted hatred for love; for every sneer and snub, for every unkind word and unjust judgment, for every self-righteous opinion, we need to confess.

It is not our decision to determine whether it is too small to be mentioned or so big we think it can't be forgiven. Our task is simply to be honest, to open our hearts to God.

Max Lucado, great preacher and one of my favorite writers, says that "confession is telling God you did the thing he saw you do. God doesn't need to hear it as much as you need to say it."

Any personal spiritual checkup begins with confession, and our second word is **CONFLICT**: Any unresolved conflicts in our life that need to be made right? High number, low number? Any number isn't good, is it?

We need to check our lives in light of Christ's teachings and see where are things broken between us? James Baldwin reminds us that "not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

I love the prayer of the little girl who prayed, "Dear God, make the bad people good and the good people nice." You know the key to new life is often to hear three words, "I forgive you." And those three words depend upon three words from you or me: "I am sorry."

A personal spiritual checkup includes confession and facing unresolved conflicts, and the third word is COMPASSION: When you look at the monitor for compassion, is it at a steady rate, a positive number?

A compassionate Christian is outwardly oriented, not curved in upon oneself. Rather than being only concerned about what affects their personal interests, they look and listen to the lives of others, creating space for them. I remember having dinner with a well-known speaker during a lecture series. I asked several questions about him. Amazingly, he did not ask one question of me. My life was of no interest to him.

And you take that and move it to the lives of the least of these, as Jesus said, "Do you see them, do you care, do you ask questions?" I like what Bishop Desmond Tutu said, "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."

I really believe that compassion grows from humility. According to the desert monastics of the early church, humility is the master virtue, and it forms us after the likeness of Christ.

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Roberta Bondi reminds us that humility accepts our human vulnerability and is not overwhelmed by human weakness. Abba Anthony put it this way: “Do not put trust in your own righteousness.”

We hear this on the lips of Jesus. “Who is good but God alone?” Humility requires giving up our arrogance and pride, and when we lay that burden down, we move more like Christ in the world.

A personal spiritual checkup includes confession, conflicts, compassion, and finally, the end result of a personal spiritual checkup is a fourth word: CHANGE. When our annual medical checkup is finished, all the test results are in, then our doctors usually have some suggestions as to specific diagnoses if there are problems, changes in lifestyle as to diet, exercise, adequate rest, stress.

So the big question is for you and me as we take our personal spiritual checkup, “How are you being transformed to what is good and acceptable and perfect for God?” The problem is that when it comes to spiritual health, we always want everyone else to be better than we are willing to be ourselves. It’s the book we all write, “I’m OK, you’re NOT!”

As Brennan Manning says in his wonderful book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*: *“Most of us spend considerable time putting off the things we should be doing or we would like to do or we want to do - but are afraid to do.”*

We are afraid of failure...Each of us pays a heavy price for our fear of falling flat on our face. It assures the progressive narrowing of our personalities...As we get older we only do the things we do well. There is no growth in Jesus Christ without some difficulty and fumbling. If we are to keep on growing, we must keep on risking failure throughout our lives."

Yet what we know from the prophets and John the Baptist, from Paul's letters and from Jesus himself, God is the God who introduces change into our lives, "I make all things new," says God in the Revelation of John. Or as God said through the prophet Isaiah, "Behold, I am doing a new thing. Will you not be aware of it?" And as Paul wrote in the second letter to the Corinthians, "If you are in Christ, you are a new creation...everything old has passed away...everything has become new!"

This is the transformation, the change that lies beneath the great question Jesus asked of the paralytic: "Do you want to be healed?" If you don't, no checkup is needed. But if you do want to get stronger in your life with Jesus, then you are ready to take a personal spiritual checkup - confession, conflict, compassion - that allows us to change, and then we can say as the old mountain woman did, "I ain't what I ought to be; I ain't what I'm gonna be; but thank God, I ain't what I used to be!"

And that, I think, is a healthy report for a personal spiritual checkup!

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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