

SPIRITUAL SELF-EVALUATION

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 2, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

As one reads the scriptures, he becomes aware that God intends for him to turn his attention inward and carefully to evaluate himself from time to time. This self-evaluation should be done regularly and often in order that man may keep a careful check upon himself. In II Cor. 13:5, the apostle Paul wrote, "Examine your own selves, whether ye are in the faith; prove your own selves." In writing to the Corinthian church, as found in I Cor. 11:28, the same apostle said, "But let a man prove himself, and so let him eat of the bread, and drink of the cup." In this case he had immediate reference to the preparation necessary before one eats the Lord's Supper, but the principle applies in all of man's relationships to God. The fact is that a wise man will carefully study his own behavior and make regular evaluations.

A second fact worthy of great emphasis is that most people recognize nothing bad within themselves. Through the years I have become more and more aware of the fact that people are often honestly blind to their own faults. For example, I have often heard a person speaking of certain Christian characteristics as being sorely needed in the lives of others, whereas he himself also needed those same characteristics badly. It is easy to see the faults of others; it is difficult to recognize one's own faults. The apostle Paul explains this self-deception by saying, "They themselves, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves with themselves, are without understanding." (II Cor. 10:12). This is a very common practice and is one of the easiest ways for a person to come to the conclusion that he, himself, is quite good, whereas he may be good only by comparison with those about him who are worse than himself.

Unwarranted Confidence

Some years ago the Gallup Poll reported on a series of religious questions that had been asked of a significant cross-section of the American people. One of the questions was, "Do you believe in heaven?" The answer was an overwhelming yes. A second question was, "Do you expect to go to heaven when you die?" Eighty-eight percent of the people questioned confidentially expressed their faith that they would go to heaven. In sharp contrast we remember the words of Jesus, "Enter ye in by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate and straitened is the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it." (Matt. 7:13-14). It was Robert Burns, the Scottish poet, who said,

O, that God the gift would give us,  
To see ourselves as others see us.

In the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Everybody talkin' 'bout heaven ain't gwine there."

Our first step in spiritual self-examination is the realization that we may be blind to our own faults, that we may have a very distorted view of ourselves. It would often be wise to ask the advice and counsel of sincere, mature, spiritually minded Christian friends. When we fall ill, we go to see a doctor. Often we tell him our symptoms and then volunteer our explanation of why we feel badly. Our diagnosis may be very wrong. It often is. In any case, the doctor does not take our interpretation of the symptoms, but runs the usual series of tests: temperature, blood pressure, listening to the lungs, electrocardiogram, and the rest. These tests are a far more accurate evaluation of our physical condition than our own subjective appraisals.

Let us, in view of such possibilities of error, and in view of the difficulty of spiritual self-evaluation, propose a series of tests which will help us to see ourselves more objectively and which will help us in our tremendously important quest of self-examination. These several tests are windows through which we may look into our own souls and see ourselves as we really are.

Test No. 1--Music

We can learn something about ourselves by considering the music that we enjoy. This is not a concern over whether this music is classical, or popular, or country, but a concern over whether it is sensual and erotic. Much of the music that is played today appeals to the base and impure. Many of the lyrics are suggestive and immoral. In fact, it would be embarrassing to analyze in mixed company the meaning of the words of some popular songs.

Someone has said, "The songs of a people are more important than their laws." This may or may not be true, but the influence of the songs that people hear and sing is tremendous upon the attitudes and behavior of the people, especially the very young. This is a rather frightening thought when one thinks of the musical diet that is fed to the young people of our nation in our day. Modern disc jockeys provide a very thin diet for Christians.

On one occasion Paul wrote, "Look therefore carefully how ye walk, not as unwise, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is, and be not drunken with wine, wherein is riot, but be filled with the Spirit; speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." (Eph. 5:15-19). We have too exclusively applied this passage to singing in public worship. Actually, the apostle Paul is teaching that Christians ought to fill their lives with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. How much better off the people of our land would be if they heard fewer of the typical popular songs of the day and spent more time in contemplating and singing the spiritual hymns that have built spiritual strength through the ages.

#### Test No. 2--Humor

We can learn something about ourselves by considering the humor that we enjoy. Many of the stories that are told present a brand of humor that is off color. It is rather distasteful to be at some gathering and hear a man say, "Here is a what I heard the other day ... (pause) ... Are there any women present ... Well, let me go ahead and tell it to you ..." If a person especially enjoys such humor this is an indication that he needs to make some changes. You can tell a great deal about a man or a woman by the kind of humor that he enjoys.

#### Test No. 3--Companions

We can learn a great deal about ourselves by considering the companions that we seek. Let each one of us take a close look at the people that we choose for our companions. Are they the kind of people that we want to be? Are they the kind of people that please the Lord? Are they the kind of people that build a nation, or a community, or a family? What is it about them that attracts us? We also need to remember the words of the apostle Paul, "Evil companionships corrupt good morals." (I Cor. 15:33).

#### Test No. 4--The Way We Spend Our Free Time

We can learn a great deal about ourselves by considering the way that we spend our free time. This is time that we may spend in any way that we like. In such intervals of time what kind of magazines do we read? What kind of movies do we see? When a man buys a ticket to see a movie, he tells a great deal about himself. He indicates that he likes whatever it is that has been advertised on the billboards concerning this movie. He is voting for the kind of thing that is to be shown.

Windows that open to the very heart, are such questions as, "When we can think about anything that we want to think about, what do we think? What do we talk about? What do we get excited about? It is interesting to study people in terms of their interest and enthusiasms in various conversational subjects. Sometimes we talk with a man who is only casually interested while the conversation dwells on spiritual matters, but a light comes into his eyes as we switch the subject to sports or to investments. Sometimes a woman seems to have little interest in a conversation that deals with spiritual matters, but when the subject turns to garden clubs, or the latest fashions, or travel, the interest is greatly increased. While these subjects are not wrong in themselves, it is wrong when one has a greater interest in such subjects than in his relationship to the Lord.

#### Test No. 5--The Way We Spend Our Money

We can learn a great deal about ourselves by considering the way we spend our money. This is a concrete indication of what we think is most important. Many Christians are rather materialistic minded and yet do not realize it. Their expensive clothes, their luxurious type of living, their emphasis upon food, and other physical things give clues to their real interests in life.

It would seem that if one is truly spiritually minded the use of his income would certainly include generous contributions to the various causes that constantly appeal for funds to help unfortunate children, or aged people, or those who suffer in foreign war-ravished lands. Surely a Christian will show by his contributions and by his general use of money that his dedication to the Lord is more than a matter of words and more than a matter of an hour in the house of God on Sunday.

#### Test No. 6--Our Lives in the Light of the Scriptures

More important than any of the other tests mentioned is the deeply revealing practice of reading the great key passages of the scriptures and comparing our own lives with these God-given commands. Let me mention some of these great passages that will assist us so materially in seeing ourselves as we really are.

Let us begin with Exodus 20:1-17, which contains the ten commandments. How does your life fit these great commandments? Have no other Gods before me. Thou shalt make no graven image. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. Remember the Sabbath day, which in the Christian era has been changed to mean the first day of the week. Honor thy father and thy mother. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not bear false Thou shalt not covet.

Turn next to Christ's great sermon on the mount, as found in Matt. 5, 6, and 7. Think particularly of the beatitudes with which it begins and then such passages as, "But seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness." (Mat-t. 6:33). Also remember, "Judge not

that ye be not judged.” And, “All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 7:1, 12). Just how well do our lives fit these admonitions?

Still another great passage is II Peter 1:5-7, where we read, “Yea, and for this very cause adding on your part all diligence, in your faith supply virtue; and in your virtue knowledge; and in your knowledge self-control; and in your self-control patience; and in your patience godliness; and in your godliness brotherly kindness; and in your brotherly kindness love.” Are all of these generously developed in our lives?

In the Galatian letter Paul says, “Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousies, wraths, factions, divisions, parties, envyings, drunkenness, revelings, and such like; of which I forewarn you, even as I did forewarn you, that they who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” All of these must be studiously eliminated from our lives. The apostle then continues, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control; against such there is no law.” (Gal. 5:19-23).

In I Tim. 3:1-13, Paul lists the qualifications for elders and then the qualifications for deacons. Although many of us may never be elders or deacons we can very well study the qualifications that these men should have, for in the main, they are qualifications that all Christians should aspire to. They include such things as blameless, sober-minded, no lover of money, and many others.

James 1:27 adds still another important facet, “Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.” John adds, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the of the Father is not in him.” (I John 2:15).

Finally, I would mention Christ’s description of the judgment scene as most helpful in letting us know the qualities that we must have in our lives. In Matt. 25:31-46, he presents the starkly realistic picture of all mankind standing before God in judgment. It is there that he says, “I was hungry and ye gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me; I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me.” (Matt. 25:35-36). In the judgment scene Christ adds, “But for the fearful, unbelieving, and abominable, and murders, and fornicators, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part shall be in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone; which is the second death ... And there shall in no wise enter into it anything unclean, or he that maketh an abomination and a lie: but only they that are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” (Rev. 21:8, 27).

## Conclusion

We must live in a constant attitude of self-evaluation. The apostle Paul did, for he said, “Not that I have already attained, or am already made perfect; but I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on that for which also I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold, but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 3:12-14). If we have a tendency to be complacent or over-confident about our spiritual achievements, we need to remember the words, “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” (I Cor. 10:12). Our pride must give way to humility. We must be concerned about our own weaknesses and faults. We must learn to see ourselves through God’s eyes rather than our own.

Finally, when we discover that changes are needed we must change what needs to be changed. When we learn what we need to do, we than must do it immediately. This leads to the need of becoming a Christian on the part of many. This leads to the need of rededication of life to the Lord on the part of many others. May it be that our spiritual self-evaluation leads us to understand more fully our needs and to do something about them while there is yet time and opportunity.