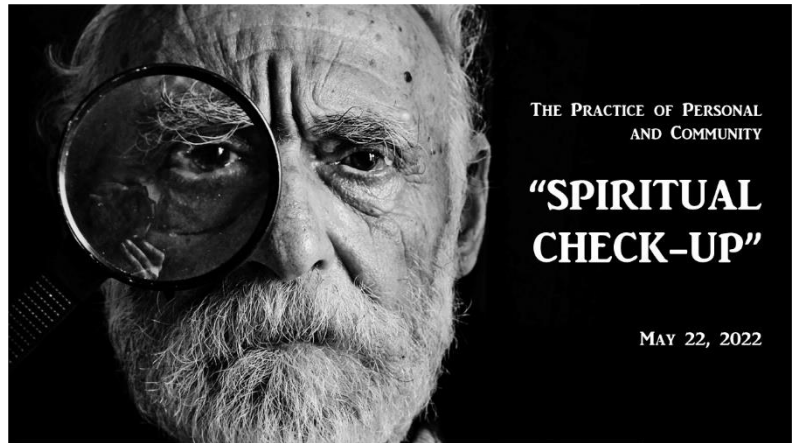


The Practice of Personal and Community
“Spiritual Check-up” - Part 1

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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Last week we ended Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthian church. Undoubtedly it was a church that had some serious issues and Paul spend 29 chapters over his two letters trying with all he had to lead the people out of the lukewarm position that seemed to be holding them tight. As we covered on our way out of that letter, there is nothing to lead us to believe that there was wholesale repentance and real humility, and thus the Corinthian church apparently passed into history clutching white-knuckled to their entrenched position. In other words, they lost. They “failed.” A sad epitaph to any life...especially one in which sat in church consistently throughout their days.

In Paul’s last remarks, he called upon the church in Corinth to “*Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless indeed you are disqualified.*” (2 Cor 13:5) Clearly this was not and *is not* just a Corinthian issue. In the Revelation letter Jesus spoke of this problem within the church of Ephesus saying “... *I have this complaint against you. You don’t love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don’t repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.*” (Rev 2:4-5)

Peter too felt as I do, being compelled to remind the believers to take pause and to review...to check their status and reestablish their bearings and trajectory. 2Pe 1:12-13 says “*Therefore, I will always remind you about these things — even though you already know them and are standing firm in the truth you have been taught. And it is only right that I should keep on reminding you as long as I live.*” Paul warned the Galatians “*You have become estranged from Christ...you have fallen from grace.*” Scripture is full of such accounts. Folks who either thought they were one of God’s redeemed children but never were or actual believers who thought they were right with God but were clearly not. The reality is that we as human beings can be so grossly misled and end up living out our lives in a void of illusion. The old saying goes “seeing is believing.” But the eyes are useless when the mind is blind.

When you’re spiritually blind you are separated from God and you will continue to lie to yourself. *I’m a good person, I know I’m not where I’m supposed to be but I’m ok because God loves me and I’m under grace, I’m doing enough to be in good standing, I have a real excuse to do this even though God says it’s sin, I’m a special case because of special circumstances, This makes me happy and God would want me to be happy, etc.*

Spiritual blindness is the reason that people can come to church faithfully and hear all the scripture in the world and yet still find excuses for their sin and rebellion. You can give them scripture after scripture, but they will find anything they can to keep and justify their sin. Have you ever wondered how one can continuously hear the gospel of Christ and scriptural directives... and they agree with what you say, but they never repent, and walk out their lives in Christ? And what is seldom considered is scripture is clear in the fact that if a person insists, God will confirm them in their blindness: Zephaniah 1:17 “*Because you have sinned against the Lord, I will make you grope around like the blind.*” Both the gospel of John and the book of Isaiah says “*The Lord has*

blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts — so that their eyes cannot see, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and have me heal them.”

“One great power of sin is that it blinds men so that they do not recognize its true character.” Andrew Murray

“In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don’t.” Blaise Pascal

We must grasp the fact that what we are involved in here is not a social club or merely a life construct that we decided was a nice and safe place to build a life. What is happening here is a war.

Many things can come upon us to cause us to drift. This week, let’s take a look at some of the common ways Satan blinds us, and next week we will look at some of the doors we leave open to Satan to allow him foothold, and hopefully the following week some ways we can practice healthy reviews of our lives and practice good defensive measures.

1) One of the ways we are attacked by Satan is what I would call “*Spiritual Delusional disorder.*” A Delusional disorder, is a type of mental illness and psychotic disorder. People who have it can’t tell what’s real from what is imagined.

Delusions are the main symptom of delusional disorder. They’re unshakable beliefs in something that isn’t true or based on reality. But that doesn’t mean they’re completely unrealistic. Delusional disorder involves delusions that aren’t necessarily bizarre, but rather have to do with situations that *could* happen in real life, like being followed, poisoned, deceived, conspired against, or loved from a distance. These delusions usually involve mistaken perceptions or experiences. But in reality, the situations are either not true at all or highly exaggerated.

Perhaps we could call this Spiritual Conspiracy syndrome. People are out to get us, or there are things going on that I am not seeing that are going to get me. It’s not what we *actually* hear, read, and see...but moreover what we *believe about* what we hear, read, and see. *Let me give you an example:* Two people can hear the same thing, one being devastated by what he heard and the other not affected whatsoever...the first individual might readily say that what was said was offensive and cruel. He therefor gets mad, depressed, vengeful...*whatever*, because of it. But if it was offensive and cruel, why does the second individual not think so? To him it was benign and he even accepts it as a fact, or at least as a valid statement or warning, etc. And often the latter individual is actually *not* just *one* individual, but *many* people...even a whole church full of them! Multiple people...all ok with what was said or what the situation is...all seeing what was said as the truth ...and it never seems to trouble the one guy that he or she is standing alone. He or she believes that they are the only one who sees this plot, or is aware of the nefarious sedition in their midst. This is spiritual conspiracy syndrome. *Spiritual Delusional disorder.* Often these folks will eventually go on to effectively burn down the village full of those who disagree with them ...refusing to consider that maybe everyone else *IS* right and that they in fact are wrong.

2) Another of these spiritual attacks...these spiritual driftings, is the idea of nebulous “middle ground” of faith. What I mean by that is the oft gradual positioning of ourselves in what we believe to be spiritual Switzerland. This plays out like this: we want to be “Christian” although the definition of that is nebulous and fluid. We believe in Christ and thus “the cause” in general, and we want to spend eternity in heaven, but we are essentially looking for a desk job where no one is shooting at us. We seek “safety” above all things. This is folks who want people to like them, and want to not cause a ruckus. But the problem is *Jesus caused a ruckus.* Did He not? And if living our lives as a Christian is essentially seeking to live our lives as Christ...A.K.A a “disciple”, then can we avoid such a paradigm? **Matthew 5:10-12** tells us that “*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*” 2 Timothy 3:12 says “*In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*”

Jesus said in John 15:18 that “*If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.*” Clearly it is impossible to live a Christ modeled life without shaking things up once in a while. Luke 6:26 warns us “*Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets.*” This practice is often played out in the workplace. We don’t want to lose business or endanger our job position so we keep our mouths shut or worse, we play along and tacitly agree with anti-christian or anti-believers church propaganda in order to make “peace.” We go along to get along. I’m not talking about needlessly offending or purposely rolling a religious grenade into the lunch room. But rather the practice of avoiding every fight, even at the expense of throwing Jesus, your pastor, or your church under the bus to save your own skin. Remember, the apostles were *beaten* because they wouldn’t back down. We back down to avoid the whispers, the “looks” from our co-workers, or maybe to hang onto a job that at least at *that point forward* no longer has God’s blessing on it.

These folks seek “peace” above all things and are apt to hear a voice support them in this...because after all “blessed are the peacemakers.” Certainly we all can understand that upon leaving the battle, whether that would be a resignation from a church or ducking the fray of battle...there would naturally be *relief!* *But peace is something different!* What they erroneously see as peace is actually a cessation from battle, not peace. Peace is something that is experienced over the long haul and is found only in the *presence of* our Captain, and in the presence of our assigned fighting unit...

3. Another way we are lulled into spiritual ill health is comfort and lethargy. In Bob Dylans song “Like a Rolling Stone” he sang the lyrics “When you ain’t got nothing, you got nothing to lose.” Oh, but we *do* have something now and we feel we have plenty to lose! When this fellowship started we were a bunch of students, recent grads with minor jobs, and very used cars. But now we have houses, mortgages, car payments, marriages, kids, and career jobs. When we began we had nothing but a whole lot of zeal and passion and a desire to change the world. But now we’re comfortable and comfort naturally spawns lethargy. Because we have been Christians for so long we can begin to feel that we have done enough and sacrificed enough. Or at best...we are *doing* enough and *sacrificing* enough. We can begin to resent the plethora of church activities and endeavors, with claims of “we’re *busy!*” But are you really? And moreover, should you be? If you are that busy in the world, have you not placed “other god’s before Him?” And the ultimate question is...if you are consumed with the things of the world, one must question your level of love and passion for Christ and kingdom. Perhaps now what is done for church and kingdom is out of obligation instead of that passion and love you once had. But in our present age of cultural Christianity, we are inundated with the idea that Christ needs to “fit into” our lives instead of being your whole life and the sieve through which everything else is run. Passion melts away, because ...well, you are just not as in love as you once were, and the greater church world and of course Satan, we tell you that that is perfectly normal and ok.

The 4th addition to our list is isolation. As I mentioned before, love takes time, investment, and will cost you some skin. The problem here is when we begin to take people and our church community for granted, and cease to be thankful. So I no longer hold these things up as priorities. And if I am in an over-all funk, I generally don’t want anyone else to know about it and God forbid they try to deal with me concerning it, so...put it all together in a blender and you get personal isolation. It’s here that Satan gets a hold of your mind because now there are no checks and balances...no one to tell you you are being crazy or that you need to get it together because you are dancing into sinful practices. Satan has been using this one quite successfully for centuries. When we stop accepting the reality that we *need* each other, “iron sharpening iron” as scripture puts it, it won’t be long before you are out in left field and soon making your way out to the parking lot. We have witnessed this isolated craziness on numerous occasion, so it shouldn’t take a lot of explanation. Why it therefore takes a lot to get a person out of that closet is therefore mind-boggling, because one would think that after seeing someone’s parachute not open and they crash to the ground we would be less apt to be so willing to be the next to jump out of the plane!

And 5, how is your joy and your peace? No...don't mis-hear me. I didn't say *happiness*. Happiness is a fickle and oft worldly emotion that is based on positive interactive experiences and maybe a day of shopping. The bible is short on promises of boundless happiness. There is the constant debate: *can money buy happiness?* Yes it can. But it can't buy joy and it can't buy peace. Those are proprietorial aspects of Jesus Christ. But somewhere along the way we begin to see less value in them and more in fleeting happiness...that instant and glorious emotional gratification...however brief. We become addicted like we would to any other drug, and every waking moment becomes about finding and consuming *more*. Lord knows then we don't want any sweat equity and long term investments gumming up the chain of supply...because those are things that only bring us "joy and peace." Joy and peace manifests in *satisfaction* and I just can't get no satisfaction. You can't because these things require work, sacrifice, humility, and other-centeredness. And so what we manifest is simply "sad." For the record...my joy brings me a lot of happiness as a secondary benefit, but such is not intrinsic to my living. "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over...*"

The last of my finite list today, would be the lack of discipline. We're tired. We don't really want to hold the line anymore. We are willing to forgo that the word "discipline" is an inherent property of the word "disciple." This is more than failing to pursue a regular bible reading and devotional life and reading godly books for continual education. Those issues are real and they matter, but they are too easy in this greater matter. Failure to pursue such things are more of a *symptom* than a *cause*. Lack of discipline, spiritually speaking, begins to show up in our marriages that are starting to show signs of dysfunction...our wives are drifting out there because we aren't leading anymore. It shows up in our kids...our families... they don't want Jesus...or at least a dynamic relationship with Him because they don't see the value or importance in **you**. You are disconnected and distant. To them, Christianity is just about going to church, because they don't see any zeal in your day to day living and home life. They don't see the *passion*. It shows up in the fact that you have begun to let yourselves go. Physically. Relationally. Missionally. If the world was to diagnose us, they would say we have issues of depression. Our worship is forced. Our service is obligatory. Our prayer life non-existent or "gimme" oriented.

All these issues are far from exhaustive. But often we cannot see the forest through the trees. We are in the dark and feeling around for the light switch. But we can get out of this if we want to. I know that we can inadvertently find ourselves alone and hiding in a cave like the prophet Elijah... 1 Kings 19 records "Then he went on alone into the wilderness, traveling all day. He sat down under a solitary broom tree and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said." There he came to a cave, where he spent the night. But the LORD said to him, "**What are you doing here, Elijah?**"

... "Go out and stand before me on the mountain," the LORD told him. And as Elijah stood there, the LORD passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper. And God asked him again... "*what are you doing here Elijah...?*"

More next week.