
On Growing Old Faithfully

Ecclesiastes 12 might seem a little grim but it's the truth of these our final years. Yet God still has work for us to do. Even though our time might be short, we should rejoice that we can still encourage one another to labour on in the service of our ecclesia and our families. We can still preach the Truth of God's Messiah to those in darkness, and hold fast to the One Faith in gentleness and love.

How will people remember us?

If we are faithful, kind, just, loving, understanding, patient, if we have lived good lives, if we have made our peace with those we might have offended, if we are remembered not as perfect, but as someone who was willing to admit mistakes, a person willing to try to put things right, to seek reconciliation and forgiveness, in other words to live out the atoning work of Christ in our lives, then we will have done a great service through our example.

Speaking from the ground

The Apostle Paul reminds us Abel is still speaking from the ground although he has been dead for thousands of years. Paul says Abel was a man whose example is enduring. **Hebrews 11:4** *And through his faith, (or because of his faith, by means of his faith) though he died, he still speaks.* Abel's work is not finished, and neither is ours just because we turn 70 or 80 or 90 or even when we finally fall asleep, as long as we have remained faithful. If the Lord does not return in the next 100 years and we lie in forgotten graves, the good we have done, our example of faith, can live on in the lives of those who come after us and so their lives can be better for knowing us.

Self-examination

Perhaps we might ask the question, "In what ways are the lives of others better because of my life? How is the ecclesia better because of my being here? How are the lives of my children better because of me? Is my spouse more likely to be in the Kingdom of God because of me?" This is not indulging in pride or in boasting but is, rather, part of an honest self-examination to identify further opportunities to improve and so better serve one another and our Heavenly Father.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that they should not dare take the emblems without a thorough self-examination and correction. **1 Corinthian 11:27** *Let a person examine himself ... and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment (or condemnation) on himself.* Paul goes on to say that because many Corinthians had not engaged in this exercise in an honest way, they were *weak and ill, and even the faith of some had died.* Paul is saying we need to come to understand ourselves better and better, that self-examination is a key way to fight our self-absorption and selfishness, and, if engaged in honestly, can improve our relationship with God and our brothers and sisters. Self-examination helps us come to a life that is actually worth living, a life of service to God through humility and kindness to others.

Spiritual health

We spend a great deal of time and money on our bodies to ensure we are as healthy as possible in our old age. And this is the correct thing to do and is designed to detect problems in our physical and mental constitution as they start to arise. But do we assess our spirit and our heart with even greater diligence than we do our bodies? In the end, no matter how much time and money we spend on our physical body, it is going to fail us. Our spiritual health, however, can continue to improve right up to the moment we depart this life and lead us to a body that will never grow old. The sooner

we recognise an illness of either the body or spirit the sooner we can move to a cure. We don't want to leave either physical or spiritual illness too long.

Important questions

Some questions we might ask ourselves in self-examination. They were developed by John Wesley and modified slightly:

- Am I a hypocrite, consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am?
- Do I exaggerate or am I honest in all my acts and words, or?
- Do I gossip, passing on to another what was told to me in confidence?
- Can I be trusted to keep my word?
- Am I self-pitying or self-justifying?
- Do I give the Bible time to speak to me every day?
- Am I enjoying prayer or is a perfunctory chore?
- When did I last speak to someone else about my faith?
- Do I disobey God in anything?
- Do I still do something even when my conscience is uneasy?
- Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy, or distrustful?
- How do I spend my spare time?
- Am I proud?
- Do I thank God that I am not as other people?
- Is there anyone I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold a resentment toward or disregard? If so, what am I doing about it?
- Do I grumble or complain constantly?
- Is Christ in my life real to me?

I doubt there is anybody who can say self-examination is a comfortable process if done in the light of God's Word. But we can't stop at self-examination. If all we do is identify our faults, we could find ourselves depressed and unhappy and seriously doubting if there is any possibility of being in God's Kingdom. There is much more to self-examination than just looking for wrong. Self-examination can be a positive process if done in the context of the knowledge of God's love for us, that He sent Christ into the world not to condemn us but so we might live in Christ forever.

Gilead's Balm

There is an African-American song that has these words: *"There is a Balm in Gilead that soothes the sin sick soul. There is a balm in Gilead that makes the sinner whole."* So prominent and efficacious was this balm in ancient days that it became a metaphor for spiritual healing. It came to stand for something that had the potential to cure the spirit of men and women. When Jeremiah surveyed the physical and spiritual ruin that was Israel, he asked a series of rhetorical questions: **Jeremiah 8:22** *Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?* God tells us in **Jeremiah 9:3** why this situation had occurred: the people did not understand His Word in all its wonder and therefore they did not understand His character, His love and His faithfulness. God is saying to His people, "why don't you know your place before me, why don't you look at yourselves and so understand just how spiritually ill you are? Why are you chasing after vain and worthless things? I have the cure for all your spiritual ailments. Seek those things that will last for eternity: *seek ye first the kingdom of God* and in that search, you will find the Balm of Gilead and so cure your sin sick soul."

Faith in God and in Christ is the essence of the Balm of Gilead that gives us spiritual health no matter how challenging our physical constitution might be. Christ said in **John 14:27** *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. I am with you even to the end of the age.* True peace comes from humbly seeking deeper Truth, it comes from a closer oneness with God and Christ, it comes from understanding that the atoning work of Christ shows us the way we should live in service to God and our fellow men and women.

The treasure we carry

As older brothers and sisters we carry an enormous treasure trove of experience, an enormous store of wisdom that can help mould and guide others both now and into the future. What a privilege and honour to be asked by a younger person for advice. They are asking us to turn to the deep well of our experience and to draw sweet water, life giving water, that will soothe and calm and help them understand what is happening in their lives and the purpose of trial. It's the Balm of Gilead they are seeking, and they are hoping we might be able to provide it for them. But we need to be so careful how we phrase any advice we might feel moved to give. **Ecclesiastes 7** warns us never to say, *Why were the former days better than these?... For it is not from wisdom if you think and speak that way.* Encouragement is a far better course. Be careful to point out the good and the worthwhile, being positive with what we say about the efforts they are making no matter how humble those efforts might be. If criticism is to be given, do it in a way that shows we understand what led to the situation they are in, maybe we have been there ourselves.

If we truly want a relationship with people younger than ourselves, we must let them know us, and better still, we must get to know them and not be impatient with them. Lesley and I went to the funeral of a sister who died in her 50's. We remarked on the number of younger sisters and young women present and asked them what had drawn them. The response came again and again, "because she talked to us, she seemed interested in us, in what was happening in our lives." The sister they came to remember sought to listen rather than to speak, sought to understand people younger than herself. Like Abel, that sister still speaks to us today – she just did.

When we can't fix things

One of the hardest challenges are the situations we can't fix. We tried to mend a relationship, improve an ecclesial situation, but people were not responsive, perhaps they were even aggressively negative. We should not lose faith in God, however, and carefully examine what it is we are trying to accomplish and the positive and negative things that might flow if people take our advice. Unintended consequences arise when we have not thought hard enough in the light of God's Word or acted hastily. And, most important we need to carefully examine our motives, our reasons for wanting something to improve. Do we want people to follow our advice for our own self-aggrandisement, because of our desire to influence, because of our impatience, because of our lack acceptance that God may well be working to a different timetable altogether?

One of the most hurtful and distressing facts we might need to face in our lives is children or grandchildren who do not accept the Truth. We have cared for them, taught them about God's love, about the return of Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom but they never choose to be baptised. Yet because they were raised in a Godly home and because we are their grandparents, our faith can live on in them through our enduring example. Inside them is that grain of Truth that we planted when they were young, and we should pray that one day it might spring from what now seems barren earth. It does happen.

We should be very careful not to stifle that growth through what we say to them but rather provide the rich soil of love through our continuing example of understanding and kindness. We should remember that some seeds can take decades to sprout. Our children do know the Truth and we should never despair, always keeping the door open to them, remembering birthdays, calling them on occasions, asking after their children while looking for a God given opportunity to sensitively remind them of the love of God and His desire that no man or woman should die. But we must pick our moments carefully and not be seen as harping on one subject, of “playing the guilt card”. Who knows (God knows) someday, they might ask us about their relationship with God. Our example of faithfulness, both past and present, is an enduring one.

Ecclesiastes 12 This is the end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Remember us for good oh Lord.

John Quill
