

March 1996

Frank W. Nelte

EXAMINE YOURSELF BEFORE THE PASSOVER

It is a tradition in the Church that, as the Passover approaches, the ministry gives several sermons about "Prepare for the Passover" and "Examine Yourself Before the Passover". Since at the Passover we are re-affirming the commitment we made to God when we came into God's Church, it is certainly appropriate that we "examine ourselves".

So let's look at this matter of preparing ourselves for the Passover more closely.

The best-known Scripture in this regard is found in 2 Corinthians 13:5.

EXAMINE YOURSELVES, WHETHER YE BE IN THE FAITH; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? (2 Corinthians 13:5)

There is an old saying that ... "if you don't know what you are looking for, then you'll never find it".

Before we can examine ourselves, we must know what we are looking for. WHAT are we to examine in our lives? What are we to look for? This is of the utmost importance, because if we look for the wrong things, then we will reach the wrong conclusions.

For example, if we look for Sabbath-keeping and for Holy Day observance and for compliance with God's dietary laws and the laws of tithing, then we will reach a conclusion based on the presence or absence of these things. But are these really the things we should be "examining" in the first place?

No, they are NOT the things we should be examining!

The most important thing to understand is that we are to examine OURSELVES! Sabbath-keeping is not "us"! Holy Day observance is not "us"! Tithing is not "us"!

To examine ourselves means that we are to examine OUR MINDS! It is the mind that is renewed at conversion (see Romans 12:2). It is the mind which originates "the thoughts and intents of the heart" (see Hebrews 4:12), and God is able to clearly discern all of our inner thoughts. To examine ourselves means to examine our inner motivations.

So what are we to look for when we examine ourselves? Are we looking for perfect understanding? Are we looking for total obedience to God? Are we looking for Sabbath-keeping and submission to all of God's laws?

No, that's not what we should be looking for primarily!

Don't misunderstand. Yes, certainly, Sabbath-keeping and obedience to all of God's laws should be there. And yes, there should be a good understanding of God's ways and God's Word. But these things are only secondary to what we should be looking for when we examine OURSELVES!

When we examine ourselves, what we must be looking for is TOTAL INTEGRITY OF HEART!

AN ANALOGY

Supposing you wanted to know whether the people in this world are being blessed by God or not ... what would you look for? Would you look for wealth as the evidence of God's blessings? Yes, God has blessed some of His servants with very great wealth (e.g. Abraham, Jacob, Job, David, etc.). But does this make wealth a clear indication of God's blessings?

NO!

After all, any number of crooks and gangsters have also accumulated great wealth. The "drug lords" of South America are extremely wealthy, but no one would claim that they are being blessed by God.

So wealth is not the proof for God's blessings, even though wealth MAY at times be a part of the blessings God bestows. The thing to look at is THE LIVES of people ... are they at peace, happy, content, protected, etc. OR are they in constant trouble with aggressive, angry, hostile dispositions, etc.? There is no peace for the wicked (see Isaiah 57:21), but God gives peace of mind and confidence to His faithful people.

Thus: to look for Sabbath-keeping and for Holy Day observance as evidence is like looking for wealth as evidence of God's blessings. To conclude that someone must obviously be pleasing God because that person is keeping the Sabbath and is tithing is just as wrong as concluding that someone must be blessed by God simply because the person has a lot of money.

A DANGER TO AVOID

The danger in examining ourselves is that we might end up looking at "THINGS", instead of examining our own minds and the inner motivations of our hearts. When we look at "things" it is easy to reach a wrong conclusion ... just like concluding that a crook is blessed by God because the crook has a lot of money.

Can we look into the Bible and then see the REAL "me"? Or does our deceitful heart also manage to deceive US? Do we understand Jeremiah 17:9? Do we know our own heart?

The heart [is] deceitful above all [things], and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

More than anyone else, our own minds desperately want to deceive US OURSELVES! It wants us to believe that the motivations for our actions are more noble than they are in many cases. Our minds want to deceive us into believing that our actions have nothing to do with selfishness. Our minds want to focus on the outward actions of obedience so that we can say "I'm okay" ... never mind whether the motivations for those actions are right or wrong.

Do we recognize the two tendencies of the human mind, which Paul highlighted in Romans 2:15, in ourselves?

Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and [THEIR] THOUGHTS THE MEAN WHILE ACCUSING OR ELSE EXCUSING ONE ANOTHER;) (Romans 2:15)

Does MY mind have this tendency ... to EXCUSE and to minimize my own failings and shortcomings and to ACCUSE others for their failings? It really is a pretty universal way of thinking. Satan was the first one to think this way, and he has sold all of humanity on the same line of thinking. It is universal enough for Paul to have stated this as a general observation.

And so we are instructed to examine OURSELVES!

ARE YOU "IN THE FAITH"?

Let's go back to 2 Corinthians 13:5. We are to examine ourselves as to whether we are "in the faith". The Greek phrase used in this verse is "en te pistei" and it really means "WITHIN the faith".

The question is not whether we "have" faith or not. The question is whether or not we are "within THE faith". "The faith" refers to the whole way of life which is revealed in the Bible. It refers to thinking like God thinks. It refers to living by God's laws from a right motivation. It refers to doing the right things for the right reasons. It refers to a desire to always want to please God in everything we think and do.

Thus:

The question is not: do we not steal?

Rather, the question is: do we not steal for the right reasons?

The question is not: do we keep the Sabbath?

Rather, the question is: do we keep the Sabbath for the right reasons?

The question is not: do we not tell lies?

Rather, the question is: are we always honest for the right reasons?

The question is not: do we not smoke or get drunk?

Rather, the question is: are we in agreement with God that smoking and getting drunk are wrong?

The question is not: do we not commit adultery?

Rather, the question is: are we in total agreement with God that adultery is always wrong and should never be committed? Are we faithful to our mate for the right reasons?

The question is not: do we not covet other people's goods?

Rather, the question is: do we agree that it is wrong for us to covet and that we should never do it?

The question is not: do we abstain from eating unclean meats?

Rather, the question is: do we agree that unclean animals are simply not fit for human consumption and should never be eaten?

The question is not: are we modest in the clothes we wear and in our general appearance?

Rather, the question is: are we really desirous of pleasing God by the way we dress and the way we

groom ourselves? Are we modest for the right reasons?

The question is not: are we faithfully tithing?

Rather, the question is: are we really tithing for the right reasons or are we only tithing because we have to do so?

The question is not: are we obeying all of God's laws?

Rather, the question is: are we IN AGREEMENT with God's laws? Do we obey them because we WANT TO DO SO and not just because we have to do so? And if all of God's laws really were only "suggestions" from God, would we faithfully live by all of God's "suggestions"?

Are we personally and individually totally convinced that all of God's laws are right and good? Are we constantly seeking to understand how we might apply God's laws more fully in our lives? Do we really seek to understand the mind of God ... by striving to understand THE INTENT behind all of God's laws? Do we REALLY want to become like God in the way we think?

If WE had the opportunity to create a universe and then to create human life in this universe ... would we want to give EXACTLY 100% the very same laws which God Almighty has given to us ... or would we modify some laws and change or drop others? How would WE desire that the human beings WE would create would live?

Do we obey God's laws because our desire is to please God? Or do we obey God's laws because we fear the penalty? What is our motivation ... to please God or just to stay out of trouble?

If we obey God for the wrong reasons, if we do not really have a desire to seek to understand the mind of God so that we may obey God more fully, if our motivation for obedience is nothing more than a desire to stay out of trouble ... THEN WE ARE NOT REALLY "IN THE FAITH"!

So when we examine ourselves, the question is:

"AM I OBEYING GOD IN THE TOTAL INTEGRITY OF MY HEART, OR IS THERE ANY AREA IN WHICH I AM HOLDING BACK, WHERE I WANT MY WILL?"

WE ARE ALL TESTED!

Now is the time to carefully examine our own minds. Recognize that our minds want to be thought of as "good", even when we really desire to do things that are not good. Recognize our own minds in the descriptions God gives us in His Word of the human mind in general.

Obedience to God because we "have to" obey is fine as a starting point as far as God is concerned. But God will never accept "forced obedience" as the end product in the process of character development. Before that process is completed, THE MOTIVATION for obedience must have changed from a fear of penalties to a desire to please God in every possible way. Each one of us must come to the point where we unconditionally say: not my will be done in every aspect of my life, but YOUR will be done, Father.

Earlier I already referred to Hebrews 4:12, that God can read our inner motivations. He can see our thoughts and our attitudes. He knows exactly WHY we do the things we do. He also knows those areas of our characters that are as yet uncommitted and which need to be exposed to testing.

Now understand this!

While God knows our thoughts and our motivations, He will not in this age condemn us based on that knowledge alone. I am not speaking about God knowing everything in advance, as for example every decision we will ever make. I believe we DO have free moral agency and that God chooses not to know in advance which decisions we will make.

What I am speaking about is decisions we have ALREADY made, but which are not outwardly apparent. For example, of all the people who have been baptized by a minister of the Church of God, God KNOWS exactly who amongst them has never been repentant in the first place. Of the people who attend God's Church and who have divorced a mate and then remarried, God KNOWS who has done this for the right reasons and who has done this by playing the angles to get their own way, and who, once they have what they want, are extremely desirous of being totally repentant and committed and eager to obey God in every area of their lives from then onwards.

When God knows our innermost thoughts, then He brings about circumstances to bring those thoughts out into the open. And that is what "testing" by God is all about ... bringing out into the open our convictions and our commitment, or our lack of convictions and lack of commitment.

This is where a principle the Apostle Paul explained ties in.

For IF WE WOULD JUDGE OURSELVES, WE SHOULD NOT BE JUDGED. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:31-32)

Do we understand what Paul is telling us in these verses?

If we would just honestly examine and face our innermost thoughts, including our weaknesses and our shortcomings, and openly present them before God with the request for His help to assist us in changing, THEN God would not have to bring about circumstances that force our hidden weaknesses out into the open. If we face and confront our "secret faults" then God does not need to expose them (see Psalm 19:12). On the other hand, if we ignore our "secret faults", then God has to bring them out into the open in a way which will result in us being "chastened". God's motive for doing this is to lead us to repentance. And so the chastening is for our own good.

But it is BETTER if we examine ourselves, openly admit our weaknesses and shortcomings to God and seek God's help to overcome these things, so we may indeed become more like God in the way our minds function. If we seek to do what we CAN do, then often it will not be necessary for God to "chasten" us. There is no chastening from God without a purpose.

Thus: the more we are willing to examine ourselves and honestly face the truth about ourselves, the less chastening God has to expose us to. That is why we are instructed to examine ourselves.

AN EXAMPLE OF TESTING

Let's look at an example which Mr. Armstrong recorded in his Autobiography. This is found in Chapter 19 of Volume 1, hard cover edition published in 1986, starting on page 338.

Mr. Armstrong had proved that Christ's resurrection was not on a Sunday morning. This he wrote up and presented to the man who had prayed for Mrs. Armstrong's healing some time before.

When Mr. Armstrong next saw him, the man said that he had gone over Mr. Armstrong's article together with his pastor. He admitted that they had not found any errors in what Mr. Armstrong had written. The man said:

"Well, no, Brother, we couldn't find anything wrong with it. It does seem to be according to the Scriptures, but, Brother, we feel that studying into that kind of subject is likely to be dangerous. It might get you all mixed up. We feel it would be better for you to just forget all about that --- just get your mind clear off of that. There are more important things for you to think about and study into. It's best to just keep your mind on Christ."

Mr. Armstrong was very discouraged by this man's lack of willingness to acknowledge the truth he had been shown. Mr. Armstrong wrote: "I walked back to our home on Klickitat Street in Portland grieved and sorrowfully disillusioned."

A week or so later when Mr. Armstrong again saw this man, the man said:

"Brother, something terrible has come over me. God has left me. He doesn't answer my prayers any more. I don't understand what has happened."

Mr. Armstrong went on to mention that God had used this trusting and deeply sincere man. Then God used Mr. Armstrong to test this man by bringing new truth to him. When this man deliberately rejected the knowledge God had exposed him to, then God rejected this man and no longer answered his prayers.

In summing up this experience, Mr. Armstrong wrote:

"The servant of God cannot stand still. Either he advances, and grows spiritually against opposition and obstacles, or he falls by the wayside to be rejected. It is not an easy road."

Notice the reasoning the man presented, when he told Mr. Armstrong: "there are MORE IMPORTANT things for you to study". That's the way people today still argue when they reject truth presented to them. They'll dismiss things they can't refute with comments like "MAJORING IN THE MINORS"!

Understand something!

We ourselves do not select what tests we will face. We do not decide HOW we are going to be tested. GOD decides when, where and how to test us. At the time we face the test, it may seem like a very minor issue indeed ... like eating or not eating one single piece of fruit (Adam and Eve) or not accepting any food on a particular occasion (the prophet who had preached against Jeroboam's idolatry, 1 Kings 13:16-17) or just a bowl of soup (for which Esau sold his birthright) or sparing the life of one single person and keeping alive some animals (Saul who didn't kill Agag) ... but the consequences can be absolutely STAGGERING and seemingly out of all proportion for such "minor" issues.

As far as God is concerned, integrity has nothing to do with whether an issue is "major" or whether it is only "minor"! Integrity simply does not differentiate between "major" and "minor". If anything, our total integrity in minor issues is indicative that we will also be acting in integrity in major issues. That's what Jesus Christ said.

He that is FAITHFUL in that which is LEAST is FAITHFUL also in MUCH: and he that is UNJUST in the LEAST is UNJUST also in MUCH. (Luke 16:10)

We human beings don't like this type of careful and meticulous obedience from the heart. And so we prefer to deceive ourselves by saying: "well, I'm faithful in all the big things, the things that REALLY count. I don't think God is worried about all those picky little things" ... referring to whatever things in which we would like licence to be less than whole-heartedly obedient.

Does YOUR mind and MY mind sometimes play those sort of games? Now is the time for us to examine ourselves.

WAYS IN WHICH WE ARE TESTED

There are several different ways in which God tests us. But at this point let's just focus on two:

1) God tests us by showing us where we are wrong. How do we respond? Are we really honest and willing to acknowledge the truth? Do we really have integrity of character? The man in the story above is a case in point.

2) God tests us by giving us the things we want. You really WANT permission to do certain things? No problem ... God will "allow" or "permit" those things to be preached to you as being acceptable in the sight of God. Your ears are itching to hear more permissive teachings? No problem ... God will "allow" liberal (and unconverted!) teachers to creep into His Church, just as Paul explained.

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away [their] ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

But when this happens ...

THEN WE ARE BEING TESTED BY ALMIGHTY GOD!

Whenever we are given the things we really wanted to have, or we are given permission to do the things we really wanted to do, THEN we are tested as follows:

God wants us, as a mature adults, to reason as follows:

"I now have what I wanted to have; and I now have permission to do what I wanted to do. BUT does God Himself really want me to have what I now have? If Jesus Christ was living in my circumstances, would Jesus Christ have wanted the things I have wanted? If Christ would NOT want the things I want, WHY would He not want them? Does God actually WANT me to do the things for which I have now obtained permission? If Jesus Christ was living now in my circumstances, would HE do the things for which I have obtained permission? Could it possibly be that, even though the Church has given me permission to do certain things, these things are in actual fact NOT really 'pleasing' in the sight of God? Is there a difference between the things God may 'allow' me to do and the things that will actually 'please' God?"

Never assume that "PERMISSION" to do something is the same as what is pleasing to God. It is only by giving us "permission" to do certain things that WHAT IS IN OUR HEARTS will actually be brought out into the open. It is only such "permission" which will expose the integrity and honesty of our hearts.

THE THINGS YOU BELIEVE

There is one more thing in regard to examining ourselves which we need to clearly face. And that is this:

YOU YOURSELF ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE!

One day we will have to give account for the things we believe. It is our own personal responsibility to "prove all things". It will never do to tell God: "I believed this or that because Mr. Armstrong taught it ... or Mr. Tkach taught it ... or I read it in an article written by this minister or that minister".

If we believe a lie, then we are accountable!

Mr. Armstrong always told us, and I say the same thing: "don't believe me; believe your own Bible". There is no excuse for those who have accepted the heretical teachings Pasadena has spread over the past ten years. We need to beware of the tendency to believe the things we WANT to believe. Unless we actually prove to ourselves what is true, we cannot hold fast to the faith which was once delivered. There is no credit for holding fast to things which OTHER PEOPLE are holding fast to, unless we have proved that they are the right things to hold fast to in the first place.

If we believe lies, God will not accept the excuse that we were "just being loyal to His government" by believing what headquarters told us to believe.

WE OURSELVES ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT WE BELIEVE!

So, as the Passover is once again approaching, and as we go about planning to physically delevaen our homes and premises, we need to also spend some time examining ourselves. Let's examine our own minds and the relationship we are developing with God. Let's prove to ourselves that in the sight of God we are indeed living in the full integrity of our hearts. If our examinations reveal problem areas, then we need to determine to make some changes.

Frank W. Nelte