

Getting More Serious About Your Faith

I learned last week that, should I die any time soon, it will not be due to gum disease or tooth decay. My dental hygienist tells me I have good teeth. They are yellow and crooked, but they are healthy. I brush many times every day but do not floss regularly. I do not stimulate my gums. I preach this one-sentence sermon to myself every time I prepare to go to the dentist. It goes like this. “How serious are you about your dental health?”

When you have a checkup, one thing the doctor finds out is how serious you are about your health. Have you taken your medications and followed the doctor’s orders regarding diet, etc.?

Every time I have pain emanating from the cervical stenosis, I imagine my physical therapist asking me if I have been faithful in doing the prescribed exercises. Here comes that one-sentence sermon again. “How serious are you about managing your pain?”

Every time I take my car to the tire shop, knowing I never check tire pressure, I preach that one-sentence sermon to myself. “How serious are you about maintaining your tires; about your safety and that of your passengers?”

When my financial / investment advisor evaluates my portfolio I can well imagine being asked how serious I am about reaching the goals I have established.

We pay advisors to help us evaluate and improve our physical and financial position. And we listen to their counsel and make the recommended adjustments. Our attention to medication, therapy, finances, investments, protection, etc. are indicators of how serious we are about reaching our goals and objectives.

How serious are we about our spiritual health? We have goals and objectives about our financial security as we approach retirement. That causes us to welcome advice that will help us manage our portfolio. As we mature, we give attention to our health and increase our efforts toward physical strength and stamina. Some will even hire a coach or trainer to advise and assist them. All of us have expectations and hopes about our eternal condition. Are we serious enough about our spiritual health and well-being to welcome an elder into our home for the purpose of prayerfully considering how we could increase the level of our spiritual development?

How serious are you about your spiritual strength and stamina? Are you serious enough to welcome an elder into your home to discuss it? And would you graciously and seriously consider his coaching without resisting or resenting it?

A good way to evaluate just how serious you are about your relationship to God and His church is to consider it from the various aspects of how we relate to God. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss my spiritual health with one or more of our elders who displays genuine interest in my soul. There are various areas of my spiritual development I would want him to help me evaluate. I want him to help me examine how serious I am about my faith as indicated by worship, the Word, stewardship, prayer and service.

ABOUT WORSHIP

Worship is life lived to God’s glory. It isn’t limited to a specific event on one day out of the week. Having said that, however, an important element in a life lived to God’s glory is the Lord’s Day gathering. Hebrews 10:22-25 contains three exhortations or instructions. They come in the paragraph that celebrates the fact that Jesus has provided us access to God, not only through His incarnation (birth), but through His death and resurrection.

The first exhortation is to draw near. The second is to hold fast the confession of our hope. And, finally, to stimulate one another to love and good deeds. In the interest of Christians remaining steadfast and faithful in keeping these instructions the writer then warns against neglect in the matter of the weekly gathering. The Bible says we must not forsake the assembly. And it comes with an emphasis relating to the coming day, which probably refers to the Lord's return. He goes on in the verses that follow to warn about the consequences of falling away, the potential for which is greater among those who forsake the assembly.

It is abundantly clear in Scripture that the gathering of the saints on the Lord's Day is of extreme importance. More important than most, if not all of the things people allow to interfere with their attendance at the Supper that features the body and blood of Jesus.

Oh, sure, you might argue that you can draw near to God without being in an assembly of Christians, citing prayer as the means. And you can probably hold fast to your confession through other spiritual activity, such as personal Bible study. You might even provide encouragement to brothers and sisters at other times throughout the week. But that doesn't change what the writer of Hebrews says about the connection of all three to the weekly assembly, prompting him to issue a word of warning against forsaking it. Practically speaking, however, it is highly unlikely that a person who habitually forsakes the assembly in favor of other priorities really has the body of Christ that close to his heart or that he is faithful in obeying these admonitions.

If your doctor, insurance agent or financial advisor, motivated by genuine interest in your desire to reach goals that favored your health or improved your financial standing, told you that you need to become more serious about pursuing your stated goals, would you accept that counsel? Or would you brush it off as insignificant? Do you go to your annual checkups just for the sake of saying you had the checkup? Or do you go with the attitude of realization that the findings may demand some changes in your life? How does that compare with your attitude toward the teaching of God's Word? Do you attend the meetings of the church just to say you had the weekly checkup? Or do you anticipate making some adjustments in your life that will enhance your testimony of life?

I would expect my spiritual overseer or shepherd to evaluate how serious I am about my faith on the basis of my faithfulness to the Lord's Supper and the assembly of God's people every Sunday. Because I know that the Bible says there is a correlation between my spiritual health and eternal well-being and how serious I am about worship. I would then expect the shepherd of my soul to help me evaluate my attention to the Word of God, asking me how serious I am about reading and studying the Bible.

ABOUT THE WORD

Does my life reflect the love and regard for the Word of God as expressed by the Psalmist? He said, "Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You. . . How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth! . . . Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. . . My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word." (Ps. 119:11, 103, 105, 148)

The Bible provides the only reliable information that forms the basis for healthy living. It answers life's most basic questions: Where did I come from? How did I get here? Why am I here? What is life all about? What is love? What happens after I die? Where am I going? We should be very serious about knowing the Word.

But to truly gauge how serious we are about the Bible, we must go beyond mere knowledge of what the Bible **says** and evaluate how our lives correspond to its teaching. In other words, it isn't how much of the Word we have in our **head** as much as it is about how that knowledge has affected our **heart, hands and feet**.

Sid Cates is a Christian educator whose concern about the apparent lack of interest in spiritual matters by his Christian school students motivated him to pursue means by which to excite such interest. The story is reported in his article at <https://www.bjupress.com/resources/articles/t2t/bible-teaching-that-educates-mind-and-directs-feet.php>. He attended a seminar called "Teaching Children to Know and Live the Bible." The leader said the key to getting students to hide the Word in their hearts is to emphasize Bible memorization. His basis was Ps. 119:11 that says hiding the Word in your heart is the key to not sinning against God. Mr. Cates followed this advice during the next school term, strongly emphasizing Bible memorization. He was disappointed, however, when he saw no marked improvement in the degree of student interest in spiritual matters. He said he concluded that there is a distinct difference between hiding the Word in the **mind** and cementing it in the **heart**. He said, "It suddenly dawned on me that **knowing** the Word centers in the mind but **doing** the Word comes from the heart. In my Bible class I needed to aim for the student's heart and not just his mind." He cited various Scriptures in support of this conclusion. "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7). Daniel 1:8 says "Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself." In His sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth that which is evil; for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). Mr. Cates concluded that right actions are produced from a right heart. That is not to say, however, that our teaching must not educate the mind, but rather that our teaching must go beyond the intellect to reach the heart, or the will. We would also emphasize the importance of the Bible impacting us emotionally.

Measuring how serious you are about the Word of God, therefore, cannot be done inside the church building. Or even in your devotional closet at home. It is measured at the office, at the gym, in your social settings. It is also measured by your dedication to discipleship, as evidenced in your stewardship, prayer relationship and service. One is not serious about the Bible until and unless its message reaches beyond the **theoretical** to make a **practical** difference in life. The key is not Bible memorization, but Bible application. We must teach and employ **principles** as much as **precepts**. Knowing God's law is good. But applying Bible teaching in practical ways to life situations is where we demonstrate that we are serious about God's Word.

If a shepherd of this flock, one of the elders charged with overseeing our souls, lovingly and gently counseled you regarding your apparent indifference to the Word, as evidenced by your behavior or conduct, how would you respond? Would your response indicate that you are genuinely serious about the Word of God?

ABOUT STEWARDSHIP

Since stewardship is an expression of worship, it, like worship, is a daily concern that impacts every part of life lived to God's glory. A way to measure how serious we are about stewardship is to evaluate how conscious we are that we own nothing. Not even ourselves. Paul says we are not our own but that we have been bought by the blood of Christ (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

If you want to find out what a person is truly serious about, look at the way he spends his time and his money. Where does he invest his time and energy? How is he investing his finances? It isn't that people must spend more time attending church meetings than in any other activity in order to show that they are serious about their relationship to God. But what does it say when a person doesn't have or take time to meet with the Lord at His Supper because he has dedicated that time to other people and interests? And what does it mean when a person does not obey biblical teaching about giving because he has committed those resources to other priorities?

Bible teaching about financial stewardship isn't really about money at all. It's about your heart. God doesn't need your money. He knows, however, that a primary measure of how much of your heart He has is the level of

cheerful generosity you display in your giving. The Bible says our giving should reflect the purpose of our heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7). It is to reflect your recognition of how God has prospered you (1 Cor. 16:2).

A person's giving does provide a pretty accurate measurement of how serious he is about his faith. It expresses gratitude for God's provision in the past, his priorities in the present, and his faith in God to supply what he needs in the future. God invites us to test Him in this by bringing the whole tithe into the storehouse, believing He will open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing until it overflows (Malachi 3:10). Jesus teaches us not to worry about what we will eat or wear, but to seek first his kingdom and His righteousness, believing He will keep His promise to give us all that we need (Matt. 6:33).

A person who is not faithful in sacrificial giving is not likely to be serious in any aspect of discipleship. Jesus says that the way we manage our finances pretty well tells the story about how serious we are about our faith.

Do you regularly examine your giving to the Lord in light of how it relates to how serious you are in your faith? Does your giving clearly reflect that you are serious about your faith to the extent that you would welcome a conversation about it with God-ordained leaders who keep watch over your soul and will give an account for your soul (Heb. 13:17)?

ABOUT PRAYER

The apostle Peter's first letter was written to Christians who were about to endure severe persecution. His message was one of encouragement based upon the hope they had in Christ. In the first chapter (v. 13) he instructs the Christians to prepare their minds for action, to keep sober in spirit, and to fix their hope completely on the grace to be brought to them at the revelation of Jesus Christ. He uses the same word, translated "sober," in chapter 4, when he writes (v. 7), "The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer." "The end of all things is near" is certainly an appropriate occasion for prayer; to be serious about prayer, I think we would all agree. Peter isn't referring to the end of the world here, but probably the imminent destruction of the city of Jerusalem. Regardless, in such traumatic times we are to be of sound mind – self-controlled, temperate, not given to emotional outburst or irresponsible reaction, but of tempered passions, as people who are possessed by the Holy Spirit and secure in God's promise. Not bewildered, confused, alarmed or fearful, but calm, so as to be able to pray – in faith. When faced with injustices, circumstances that are troubling, and emotionally charged conflict and controversy – when it feels like the end is near and hope is gone – be calmed in spirit so that you can be serious about prayer. Take comfort in knowing that God sees our troubles and be assured that He has the power and ability to make His glory known, despite the circumstances and surroundings.

The apostle Paul emphasizes we should be serious about prayer in the context of the spiritual battle in which we are engaged. (Eph. 6:18) In addition to putting on the full armor of God Paul says we must pray. Waging war with the evil one is serious business. Worthy of serious prayer. Pray all kinds of prayer at all times with vigilance, as a century standing guard to ensure the safety of his fellow soldiers. That is being serious about prayer! Furthermore, Paul says (v. 19) that being serious about prayer includes praying for those who proclaim the gospel, that God would provide the right words and grant boldness to say what is appropriate and needed. Is this how you pray? Are these the concerns you regularly express when you pray? Are you serious about prayer?

A very good example of a person who was serious about prayer is Daniel. His prayer in chapter nine is recognized as one of the finest in the Bible. In it Daniel acknowledges the sin of the people (4-14) and pleads for mercy (15-19). As we read it, examine your practice of prayer by comparison.

- v. 3 Daniel was in earnest, as evidenced by the fact that he fasted and humbled himself in sackcloth and ashes – the customary attire for a Jew who wished to subdue the flesh in order to concentrate upon the spiritual. These were outward indicators of humiliation and penitence. Is there demonstrable humiliation and penitence when you pray?
- v. 4 Note the way he addresses God. Does the way you approach God in prayer communicate such reverence and respect, indicating how serious you are about prayer?
- v. 5-14 Daniel's confession is significant and instructive, if not inspirational.
- v. 15-19 Daniel concludes with heartfelt petition.

I anticipate that my spiritual shepherds and overseers would want to help me develop a more serious prayer relationship with God. They should ask me if the faithfulness and fervency of prayer in my life displays that I am serious about it. One way they may help me evaluate how serious I am about prayer would be to help me candidly compare my prayers to that of Daniel. Do I pray with a humble and penitent spirit, boldly confess my sin and plead for God's mercy? I like to think that I have matured to the point that I am willing to be challenged to grow, to acknowledge weaknesses and failings, and to humbly respond in gratitude to a spiritual leader who cared enough about me to help me evaluate how serious I am about my faith. How would you respond? I certainly hope it would not be by resisting, resenting and rebelling but rather in grateful and humble compliance.

ABOUT SERVICE

One more indicator of how serious we are about our faith is how serious we are about service. In his letter to the Galatian Christians Paul celebrates our freedom from a system of law-keeping as the means of obtaining saving approval from God. But in verse 13 of chapter 5 he writes, "Do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." He warns against abusing this liberty as somehow justifying a life of anarchy (no law) or self-gratification, specifically satisfying the desires of the flesh. Such an attitude is extreme selfishness; total disregard for others.

Jesus taught His disciples about selfless service when He took the towel and basin and washed their feet (Jn. 13:5-20). Jesus said, "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you" (vs. 14-15). Jesus was serious about serving. If we are serious about our faith, we will be like our Teacher and Lord by being serious about serving.

Then again, Jesus previewed the judgment when people will be separated, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats (Matt. 25:31-46). "Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'" The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.' How serious we are about serving reveals how serious we are about our faith.

Now, return to Paul's instructions at Galatians 5:13 about serving one another. Christians are not released from responsibility to all law. We are bound by the law of love, the law of Christ. Later in this same letter Paul says we fulfill the law of Christ by bearing one another's burdens (6:2). The law of love compels us to serve, as Jesus served. How serious we are about our faith is demonstrated by how serious we are about serving.

Serving one another is not only on an individual basis, but also on the corporate level. How serious we are about our faith is measured by how serious we are about serving the body of Christ. Peter wrote, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul wrote, "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-12).

The Hebrew writer (10:24) says part of our service is to stimulate one another to love and good deeds (service). That is to be one aspect of our weekly gathering. It isn't limited to the meeting of the church, however. I would certainly consider it partial fulfillment of the elders' responsibility, as my spiritual overseer and shepherd, to actively urge me to be engaged in serving the body. One who is serious about his faith will welcome the encouragement from a church leader to be involved in service that builds up the body and glorifies God.

CONCLUSION An avowed atheist considered all Christians he knew to be crazy. It wasn't because they claimed to believe in God but that they did not take their Christian walk seriously; that they did not live as though what they claimed to be true actually is true.

How serious are you about your faith? Are you serious enough to:

- acknowledge shortcomings?
- identify how the Holy Spirit has convicted you about a specific decision you need to make?
- repent and reorder your priorities?
- seek the counsel of your spiritual shepherds?
- gratefully and humbly receive and consider an elder's counsel?