

Caveats About Self-Examination

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I Corinthians 11:27-28 So then whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in a way that is unworthy [of Him] will be guilty of [profaning and sinning against] the body and blood of the Lord. But a person must [prayerfully] examine himself [and his relationship to Christ], and only when he has done so should he eat of the bread and drink of the cup (*Lockman Foundation's Amplified Bible*).

In fifteen short days, we will be involved in the most solemn evening of the year, the commemoration of the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ's life for our sins. In this message, I want to present four serious caveats about how we examine ourselves. One of *Merriam-Webster Dictionary's* definition of the word "caveat" reads, "a cautionary detail to be considered when evaluating, interpreting, or doing something."

The first caveat, or caution, involves the physical and spiritual hazards if we ignore or take lightly this somber admonition to examine ourselves. This precious event of Passover cannot be taken lightly or casually and may detrimentally impact our health and well-being in this present life and ultimately our salvation if we continue in a careless, self-destructive behavior of neglect. If we take our preparatory part unreflectively, we can absolutely count on some bitter consequences. The apostle Paul explains in I Corinthians 11:

I Corinthians 11:30-32: That [careless and unworthy participation] is the reason why many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep [in death]. But if we evaluated *and* judged ourselves honestly [recognizing our shortcomings and correcting our behavior], we would not be judged. But when we [fall short

and] are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined [by undergoing His correction] so that we will not be condemned [to eternal punishment] along with the world.

Later in a follow-up epistle, Paul gave a similar warning to the Corinthians to thoroughly test and probe themselves for deficiencies in their faith. Let us go forward to II Corinthians 13.

II Corinthians 13:5 Test *and* evaluate yourselves *to see* whether you are in the faith *and* living your lives as [committed] believers. Examine yourselves [not me or any of your brethren, for that matter]. Or do you not recognize this about yourselves [by an ongoing experience] that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test *and* are rejected as counterfeit? [Unless you are not bearing the fruit of God’s Holy Spirit, but bearing poisonous and noxious tares.]

This somber warning shows some startling parallels with another warning in Luke 21:36 where it says, “But keep alert at all times [be attentive and ready], praying that you may have the strength *and* ability [to be found worthy and] to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand in the presence of the Son of Man [at His coming].”

Taking the Passover in a worthy manner is an incremental step to be accounted worthy to escape the horrendous tribulations coming to this earth, but more importantly a much higher goal prepared for us by God Almighty, namely to become His offspring, symbolized as the Bride of Jesus Christ in His coming Kingdom.

The preparations demanded of us at this stage in our calling will prepare us for immediate and future obstacles and challenges in our spiritual trek until we are accounted worthy of attending the Wedding Supper in Revelation 19: 6-9 in which the Bride of Christ will wear garments symbolizing righteousness.

Next is the second caution. We are foolishly presumptuous if we think we can accomplish this self-examination on our own power. The apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 8:7 that “the mind of the flesh [with its sinful

pursuits] is actively hostile to God. It does not submit itself to God's law, since it cannot. Jeremiah has shown us that, "The heart is deceitful above all things. And it is extremely sick; who can understand it fully *and* know its secret motives? (Jeremiah 17:9)

Consequently, if we try this self-examination with our own meager resources, we act with foolish presumption. None of us can see our spiritual blind-spots. If we could, they would not be blind-spots. As the reflector mirrors on our cars tell us, "The objects in mirror are closer than they appear."

If our pre-Passover self-examination is not a prayerful dialogue with our Creator, it becomes a disappointing exercise in futility and will lead to either a state of hopeless despair or a smug assumption that we are doing pretty well when we compare ourselves with other brethren in our own fellowship or in the greater church of God.

The psalmist David came to understand that he could not by his own resources understand his own deceitful consciousness—but that God alone had the searchlight that could illumine the darkness of his thoughts and motives.

Psalm 19:12-13 Who can understand his errors *or* omissions? Acquit me of hidden (unconscious, unintended) *faults*. Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous (deliberate, willful) *sins*; let them not rule *and* have control over me. Then I will be blameless (complete), and I shall be acquitted of great transgression.

In our pre-Passover examination, these should be our petitions as well.

Psalm 139:23-24 Search me [thoroughly], O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there is any wicked *or* hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.

Obviously, David did not know his own heart—and we do not know our own heart. The guilt we suffer from breaking God's law manifests itself in fear, anxiety, or chronic unease as guilt (the spiritual equivalent of physical pain)

causes intense, anguishing spiritual pain. God alone can turn His searchlight on the causes for our anxiety and unease which our carnal minds cannot possibly see.

John, in his first epistle, says that “There is no fear in love [dread does not exist]. But perfect (complete, full-grown) love drives out fear, because fear involves [the expectation of divine] punishment, so the one who is afraid [of God’s judgment] is not perfected in love [has not grown into a sufficient understanding of God’s love] (I John 4:18). That is, we are not absorbing the mind of Christ through the nourishing flow of God’s Holy Spirit.

The third caveat in self-examination is not to mistake discouragement, frustration, remorse, or worldly sorrow for godly sorrow—that is, sorrow which is prompted by the conviction of God’s Holy Spirit steering us to repentance. When Paul had to correct the Corinthian congregation for tolerating blatant sexual behavior, he later had to reel them back in from intolerance, even after the offender had repented of his sins. He then finds it necessary to make a distinction between carnal, worldly sorrow and godly sorrow.

II Corinthians 7:8-10 For even though I did grieve you with my letter, I do not regret it [now]; though I did regret it—for I see that the letter hurt you, though only for a little while—yet I am glad now, not because you were hurt *and* made sorry, but because your sorrow led to repentance [and you turned back to God]; for you felt a grief such as God meant you to feel, so that you might not suffer loss in anything on our account. For [godly] sorrow that is in accord with *the will of God* produces a repentance without regret, *leading* to salvation; but worldly sorrow [the hopeless sorrow of those who do not believe] produces death.

We do not want our sorrow about our past sins to lead us into the downward spiral of regret, hopelessness, and bottomless despair which swallowed up Judas Iscariot.

The fourth caveat in self-examination is not to make our self-examination too general, failing to focus down on specifics.

Psalm 141:2 Let my prayer be counted as incense before You; the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.

As you recall, the prayers of the saints in Revelation 8:3-4 at the time of the Seventh Seal are also depicted as finely beaten down incense. We are mandated to formulate our petitions in as complete vivid detail as is possible for us. If we ask our Creator to point out specific behaviors which are hurting our relationship with Him and our relationships with our brethren, we can expect Him to show us.

David assures us in his moving prayer of repentance—Psalm 51—that God desires from us a totally broken carnal heart before He can replace it with a clean and pure heart.

Psalm 51:16-17 For You do not delight in sacrifice, or else I would give it;
You are not pleased with burnt offering. My [only] sacrifice [acceptable] to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart [broken with sorrow for sin, thoroughly penitent], such, O God, You will not despise.

In John Reid's March 1994 article, 'A Time for Self-Examination', the editor inserted the caption "Our Standard of Measure" above the listing of the nine fruits of God's Holy Spirit appearing in Galatians 5:22-24. John Reid reminds us that we measure ourselves against Jesus Christ, the perfect Man, who possesses all the fruit of God's Spirit. These qualities are aspects of God's character that we all need to have and use.

Please turn over to Galatians 5:22-23, cardinal memory verses for most of us.

Galatians 5:22-23 But the fruit of the Spirit [the result of His presence within us] is love [unselfish concern for others], joy, [inner] peace, patience [not the ability to wait, but how we act while waiting], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law.

It is a beautiful compact list of qualities, but without specific concrete examples displaying each of those broad categories, we sometimes feel daunted by such terms because they are relatively abstract or general, leaving out specific characteristics that must be filled in with concrete examples from Scripture and from our own lives in the case of our own pre-Passover self-examination.

Words ending in *-ness* like goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, or words ending in *-ience*, like patience or forbearance, require some shading or coloring in order to make them vivid and memorable and especially applicable to overcoming. For example, the word “precipitation” - with a *tion* ending, can be concretized by specific varieties or hybrids such as rain, hail, snow, fog, mist, or sleet.

While Paul often used university level words and complex sentence structure, a practice which gave even the apostle Peter some consternation, our Savior Jesus Christ had the knack to illustrate generalization with highly concrete pictorial examples, using visual parables, metaphor, similes creating vivid images.

Luke 10:25-27 And a certain lawyer [an expert in Mosaic Law] stood up to test Him, saying, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Like the list of the nine fruits of God’s Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, this compact command covers a wide area of specific behaviors. The lawyer who was trying to test Jesus obviously had no skill in applying this supreme law to himself.

Luke 10:28-29 Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this *habitually* and you will live.” But he, wishing to justify *and* vindicate himself, asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Did Jesus reply, “Well, he’s the guy who shows outgoing concern—or he’s the guy who practices the giving way rather than the getting way, or the one who demonstrates benevolence and compassion. No! Jesus provided some practical nuts and bolts behaviorally stated objectives. Consider the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We will read here in the same chapter, Luke 10, verse 30:

Luke 10:30-37 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he encountered robbers, who stripped him of his clothes [and belongings], beat him, and went their way [unconcerned], leaving him half dead. Now by coincidence a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise, a Levite also came down to the place and saw him, and passed by on the other side [of the road]. But a Samaritan (foreigner), who was traveling, came upon him; and when he saw him, he was deeply moved with compassion [for him], and went to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on *them* [to sooth and disinfect the injuries]; and he put him on his own pack-animal, and brought him to an inn [the Hebron Motel 6] and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii (two days’ wages) and gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I return.’ Which of these three do you think proved himself a neighbor to the man who encountered the robbers?” He answered, “The one who showed compassion *and* mercy to him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and *constantly* do the same.”

Jesus demonstrated by these specific concrete behaviors that agape love is an action—not a feeling. Jesus demonstrates by concrete behaviors, modeling how we should prepare for our roles in God’s Kingdom by washing one another’s feet at Passover, instilling into our minds the all-important need for humility and servant leadership. Likewise, Jesus half-brother James, whose colorful, metaphorical, image-saturated epistle has sometimes been called the Proverbs of the New Testament, took a high-level abstraction—true religion—and defined it in nuts-and-bolts concrete terms.

Let us compare the high-level abstraction religion as defined by Merriam Webster to the definition provided by James. Consider that Merriam - Webster defines religion as . . . “a particular system of faith and worship . . . a pursuit or interest to which someone ascribes supreme importance.”

Like his half-brother Jesus, James can be counted on to provide highly visual, practical concrete nuts-and-bolts visible details.

James 1:27 Pure and unblemished religion [as it is expressed in outward acts] in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit *and* look after the fatherless and the widows in their distress, and to keep oneself uncontaminated by the [secular] world.

How about this paraphrase of a well-known scripture? Here it is. I will read the paraphrase first, then the real scripture: “Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.”

This was Orwell’s paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 9:11:

I returned and saw under the sun that—

The race *is* not to the swift,
Nor the battle to the strong,
Nor bread to the wise,
Nor riches to men of understanding,
Nor favor to men of skill;
But time and chance happen to them all.

Keeping this need to focus down on detail, let us compare the deadly, poisonous, carnal fruits of the flesh with the fruits of God’s Spirit appearing in Galatians 5.

Galatians 5:19-21 Now the practices of the sinful nature are *clearly* evident: they are sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, (total

irresponsibility, lack of self-control), idolatry, sorcery, hostility, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions [that promote heresies], envy, drunkenness, riotous behavior, and *other* things like these. I warn you beforehand, just as I did previously, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

This set of behaviors, like the fruits of the Spirit which follows, are also couched in generalizations describing our initial state before God called us and placed a smidgeon or earnest payment of His Holy Spirit within us. We could envision our carnal selves as a field covered with cockleburs, burdock, Canadian thistle, poison oak, poison hemlock, water hemlock, loco weed, or tares. The fruit of the Spirit is what we will be like as Christ transforms us into His image as we yield to Him over our entire lifetime.

Galatians 5:22-23 But the fruit of the Spirit [the result of His presence within us] is love [unselfish concern for others], joy, [inner] peace, patience [not the ability to wait, but how we act while waiting], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Galatians 5:19-23 constitutes a stark before and after picture of our justification, sanctification, and glorification process leading to our responsibilities in the Kingdom of God. Fruit-bearing metaphors are abundant throughout the Bible, with the sharpest focus appearing on the night of the Passover, when Jesus told His disciples:

John 15:1-6 I am the true Vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every *branch* that continues to bear fruit, He [repeatedly] prunes, so that it will bear more fruit [even richer and finer fruit]. You are already clean because of the word which I have given you [the teachings which I have discussed with you]. Remain in Me, and I [will remain] in you. Just as no branch can bear fruit by itself without remaining in the vine, neither can you [bear fruit, producing evidence of your faith] unless you remain in Me. I am the Vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him bears much fruit, for [otherwise] apart from Me [that is, cut

off from vital union with Me] you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in Me, he is thrown out like a [broken off] branch, and withers *and* dies; and they gather such branches and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.

At this critical juncture in our spiritual development until our death, we struggle with two natures struggling to take over (as Paul graphically describes in Romans 7).

Both Jesus and His half-brother James would undoubtedly have taken a very dim view of the current research experiments with gene-splicing, attempting to grow human organs in pig bodies or genetically modifying plants. Likewise, mixing the works of the flesh with the fruits of the Spirit is a deadly mixture of poisonous weeds and fruit. Jesus, in warning about false teachers and false doctrines, warned that a healthy tree bears good fruit, but an unhealthy produces bad fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire, symbolizing the Lake of Fire or the second death (Matthew 7:16-20). Jesus' half-brother James had the same concern in the third chapter of his epistle where he warns us,

James 3:10-12 Out of the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. These things, my brothers, should not be this way [for we have a moral obligation to speak in a manner that reflects our fear of God and profound respect for His precepts]. Does a spring send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*? Can a fig tree, my brothers, produce olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.

The fruits or works of the flesh described in Galatians 5:19-21 depicts the state of the seed sown in the thorny ground, the one who hears the Word, but the worries and distractions of the world and the deceitfulness [the superficial pleasures and delight] of riches choke the Word, and it yields no fruit. The fruit of the flesh described in Galatians 5:19-21 depict the tares which Satan the Devil has sown in the field of the world, to be burned in unquenchable fire at the end of the age.

Jesus has called us branches connected to a vine. Jesus, Peter, Paul, and James have used many agricultural metaphors describing our special calling,

including a wheat harvest, first fruits, laborers in the vineyard, and God's field. We are simultaneously the dirt in which the godly seed of the Word is implanted, the seed which grows into the fruit, the fruit which springs from the seed (both the genotype and the phenotype), and co-laborers in the harvest.

In this aspect, we are in a similar position that our original mom and dad (Adam and Eve) were in the Garden of Eden back in Genesis 2:15 when God gave them the instruction to dress and keep the Garden—cultivating the abundant fruit within. We are also in a similar state as Adam and Eve, being offered a stark contrast between the Tree of the Knowledge of Evil producing the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21 and the Tree of Life producing the nine categories of fruits of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.

As Adam and Eve's progeny, we are still encumbered with the curse on the ground in Genesis 3:18 in which thorns and thistles competed vigorously with the fruit bearing plants of the field. As co-laborers in our calling, we must develop the skill to pull out by the roots the noxious weeds which attempts to strangle the precious fruit of God's Holy Spirit.

Mike Ford wrote a fascinating *Forerunner* article back in August of 1994 titled "Weeds," in which he made a comparison of kudzu, a plant brought in from Japan to prevent erosion, but has taken over almost the entire southeast, covering ravines, whole stands of trees, entire barns, power poles, abandoned vehicles, and anything else in its path. Those familiar with wisteria know that it shares similar characteristics. Mike explains that the common characteristic or ecological niche of all weeds is to choke, strangle, and steal. They hinder fruit from maturing, not necessarily stopping growth, but slowing it down to the point that fruit never ripens.

Those farmers who cultivate row crops feel the same frustration at seeing their precious soybean crop overrun by cockleburs or Canadian thistles. My late brother Ed and I used to spend countless hours on our hands and knees pulling out the cockleburs—one-by-one—placing them in the middle of the row. As daunting and downright discouraging this project of de-weeding the field was, after a whole day's work in the field, it was gratifying to see the formerly green aggressive cockleburs wilting and perishing between the rows of healthy verdant soybeans.

As there are poisonous tares in the world and poisonous tares co-existing with the wheat in the church, there are poisonous tares existing in our own currently divided minds. As we do our part in tending the field in which God's Spirit is planted within our carnal minds, we, as patient prudent farmers, must diligently pull the poisonous weeds threatening to attenuate, quench, or destroy the Holy Spirit within ourselves.

At our pre-Passover examination, we need to take the list of killer-weeds before our Creator, asking Him to shine the searchlight of His law on those behaviors which are estranging us from Him and our brethren in Christ, taking abstract words like impurity, sensuality, jealousy, fits of anger down to our own specific behaviors, pinpointing the time, the place, and what we specifically did. Like the practice of de-leavening our homes, the pulling of spiritual weeds can be discouraging and tiring. We, then, turn to Galatians 5: 22-23 describing the nine categories of fruit that we are supposed to bear, and will bear, if we stay attached to the vine, drinking in the nourishing sap of God's Holy Spirit.

If we are daunted by how little fruit in terms of love, joy, inner peace, self-control we have, Jesus Christ, having the Holy Spirit, has modeled all of those for us to the maximum fulfillment and has provided narratives in His written Word to guide us. All of us have literally murdered our Savior Jesus Christ by doing the things that have seemed natural us. Like the repentant Publican, we may feel downcast and overwhelmed about how terribly we fall short of the perfect Standard. Jesus knows that some of us are spiritual-late-bloomers, not unlike the two avocado trees in my backyard that have not born fruit in three years (I was beginning to think they were from West Hollywood), but now finally there are abundant fruit blossoms, promising, God willing, a bumper crop close to Feast of Tabernacles time.

Hopefully, during our self-examination, as we look for fruit on the vine, we can identify specific areas time and place that were formerly addictive or destructive to us that God has taken the temptation away. We should be able to identify horrible weaknesses of spiritual timidity for which we now have developed some backbone. As we examine ourselves before Passover, we need to soberly reflect whether we have used the precious spiritual gifts God has given us to edify and nourish the Body, giving comfort and strength to

our brethren. As we take the bread and wine, renewing the covenant we made at baptism, we need to drink in Paul's encouraging words in Philippians 1:6. Let us finish there.

Philippians 1:6 I am convinced *and* confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will [continue to] perfect *and* complete it until the day of Christ Jesus [the time of His return].

In the meantime, let us be very careful how we examine ourselves for Passover, realizing that (1) taking it in an unworthy manner can result in serious physical hazards, (2) trying to use our own resources without a dialogue with our Creator is a hopeless exercise in futility, (3) substituting normal remorse or worldly sorrow brings about a downward spiral to despair and death, and (4) self-examination should be specific rather than general, referencing personal failings God has exposed, as well as a sober realistic comparison between our personal fledgling fruit with the maximally mature fruit demonstrated by our Savior Jesus Christ.