

SELF-EXAMINATION**2 CORINTHIANS 13:5-14**

Most of us struggle with self-examination. Here's one example. Celebrity chef, Gordon Ramsay, seems to have about 20 shows on TV at any given time. One show is *Kitchen Nightmares*. It features Ramsay stepping into restaurants that are living nightmares. The restaurants are typically on the verge of closing and in desperate need of help. What's interesting is that sometimes the restaurants look appealing from the outside. Often, large amounts of time and money have been spent finding the right location and creating a welcoming atmosphere. But in every episode, the real problem is the same: the food is nasty. What makes the show painfully entertaining is how Ramsay tries over and over to get the restaurant workers to realize they're in an "Oh no! situation." What they need is some brutal honesty. And Chef Ramsay is brutal. He'll usually order about a half-dozen items off the menu and with great passion and clarity explain how horrible each one tastes. The restaurant owners are in denial about the quality of their food because they're distracted by managing food orders, overseeing wait staff, shaking hands with customers—basically anything but actually making good food. The show is half over before any of them get honest about reality.

We come to the end of our study of 2 Corinthians today. The old saying that the best way to learn is to teach has certainly been true for me. It's been my privilege to explore both 1 and 2 Corinthians in their entirety since 2020 and then present these messages to you. Together, Paul's two letters to the church in Corinth make up a large chunk of the entire New Testament, so it's important for any follower of Jesus to spend time in these two letters. I've presented a total of 32 messages on those two letters because they're long! I've learned so much myself, so thank you for giving me the opportunity to learn and grow along with you.

For me, the overarching or mega theme of 2 Corinthians is the concept of being cruciform. Cruciform means to be cross-shaped. Objects can be cruciform like a piece of jewelry or a church building erected back in the middle ages. But a person's life can be cruciform, also. When we say someone's life is cruciform, it simply means we recognize the impact and influence of Jesus in how they live their lives, how they treat other people, and what they value and prioritize. They are cross-shaped.

In just a moment, we're going to read the final portion of 2 Corinthians. Paul was preparing to visit this church for the third visit. His relationship with these Christians in Corinth had been very conflicted even though he was their spiritual father and had founded their church. On several occasions in this letter he had exhorted them to grow up spiritually and rid their congregation of both blatant sin as well as wrong beliefs. He so wanted them to do this themselves before he arrived. He did not want to have to be the spiritual "heavy" when he visited them. The church as it was with all of its factions, sinful lifestyles, and fondness for what wasn't authentic spiritually was not going to make a godly impact on sin-riddled Corinth. If necessary, yes, he would clean house when he arrived if they didn't. But he so wanted his visit to be marked by joy instead of sorrow and by wonderful fellowship with one another instead of painful discipline.

Did things ever get worked out between Paul and the Corinthians? Did they take his godly advice and do the things he asked them to do? Was the relationship between the great apostle and the church he started and the people he loved there restored and reconciled? The Bible doesn't tell us clearly. There's a promising hint over in Acts 20 which tells us Paul spent three months in Corinth after this letter was written which points to the likelihood that reconciliation and restoration did happen after all.

So, let's read what Paul had to say to the Corinthians as he closed out this letter. Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to examine themselves spiritually. "Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves." (2 Cor 13:5 NLT) Was their faith in Jesus genuine, real, and authentic? Was it the same faith Paul had preached when he first arrived in Corinth years ago and they had so gladly received? The implication for you and me is clear. If we want our lives today some 20 centuries later to be truly cruciform – cross-shaped – then knowing the value of - and practicing - self-examination is important. As I reflect on these verses, three questions and their answers come to mind.

WHY DOES SELF-EXAMINATION MATTER?

The first answer to that question is more than obvious, isn't it? I'm prone to self-deception because I'm sinful. Our capacity for self-deception is pretty strong. For example, when you work out, would you consider it to be a "tough" workout? New research might poke holes in your exercise pride. It suggests both men and women tend to overestimate how intensely they work out. Researchers asked 129 participants to walk or jog on a treadmill at speeds they felt were light, moderate, and vigorous. Even after researchers described what counted as light, moderate, and vigorous activity, people tended to overrate their exercise levels. For example, people believed they were performing vigorous physical activity at levels that wouldn't be considered vigorous at all according to the nation's standards. It's defined as raising your heart rate between 77% and 93 % of its max. Most people in this study didn't even reach 75%. If we overestimate how much exercise we're getting, I can guarantee you we do the same thing spiritually. We overestimate our goodness and underestimate how we've failed to meet God's standards.

Earlier in this letter, Paul said, "Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe." (2 Cor 4:4 NLT) In another letter, Paul put it this way, "Sin took advantage of those commands (OT Law) and deceived me." (Rom 7:11 NLT) Someone might say, "Yeah, but when you start following Jesus, God forgives your sin and you're no longer a target of deception." How I wish that conclusion was true, but it's not! Because we still have this very robust sinful nature after being born again, self-deception is an ongoing problem for every follower of Jesus. Why else would Paul say to those who were already Christians there in Corinth repeatedly, "Do not deceive yourselves.... Don't fool yourselves"? (1 Cor 3:18, 6:9 NLT) If we had the time today we could look at many other passages in the New Testament that warn us against self-deception. One of our ongoing challenges right up until that moment when

Jesus takes us home to Heaven is not to get deceived by our sinfulness. It's a perpetual danger - a constant threat - to following Jesus well.

It occurs to me just in passing that right there is yet another good reason to be an active, vital, participating part of a local church like ours. There are millions of people out there in our country who consider themselves Christians but see no value in the local church. They all but guarantee their own self-deception. God didn't design any of us to follow Jesus alone. Following Jesus faithfully and well demands relationships with other people who are following Jesus. The more isolated we are the more we invite self-deception. The more alone and solitary we are in our faith, the more our own sin can blind and deceive us. That's precisely why the Bible says, "Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near." (Heb 10:24-25 NLT)

Why does self-examination matter? A second answer to that question is suggested in our text today. I'm quick to evaluate others rather than myself. Paul subtly suggested here that instead of examining and evaluating his credentials as an apostle, the Corinthians' time and effort could be much better spent examining and evaluating how well they were following Jesus. "As you test yourselves, I hope you will recognize that we have not failed the test of apostolic authority." (2 Cor 13:6 NLT) Remember, a very big issue there in Corinth was the fact these false teachers who had come to the church after Paul left were doing everything possible to destroy his impact and influence among the Christians in that city. They deemed Paul sub-par and lacking in everything. He didn't look like a leader. He lacked personal charisma. His preaching and teaching was dull. His ministry results sounded unsuccessful. He was lacking in visions. Paul was even content to be just a poor laborer working with his hands as a tentmaker when he could have received financial support from the church. Ridiculous!

What's the takeaway for you and me? Part of the way sin continues to deceive us is to encourage us to focus on the spirituality of others rather than ourselves. We end up spending a lot of time and effort examining and evaluating how well other people are following Jesus rather than examining and evaluating ourselves. The result is we end up measuring ourselves against other people rather than against God's standards. Dumb, but we're all tempted to do it! One Christian leader from the 10th century made this great observation: "They who are conscious of their own sins have no eyes for the sins of their neighbors." (Abbot Moses) The alternative is to give ourselves a shake and say instead, "At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if I'm more or less spiritual than So-and-So. What matters is if I'm following Jesus as faithfully and as well as I could. In order to find that out, maybe I should examine myself not others, and evaluate myself not others." Indeed. Well, here's a second question to ask and to try and answer.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE EXAMINED?

I can think of at least two answers to that question suggested in Paul's letters to the Corinthians as well as what he wrote to other churches. First of all, my beliefs need to

match God's truth. That was one part of the problem there in Corinth. These false teachers had arrived spouting "Christianese" all over the place and convincing many of the Corinthians that everything they said and taught was straight out of Heaven. But when you read between the lines in both of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, it's clear these guys were preaching a very different message than the one Paul had presented.

What we actually believe matters. I'm routinely dismayed by surveys of what American Christians believe. A few years ago, LifeWay Research, in association with Ligonier Ministries, did a survey among evangelical Christians. That's our tribe here at KRBC. How was "evangelical" defined? Four criteria: Evangelicals believe the Bible is the highest authority, evangelism is very important, sin can only be removed by Jesus' death, and salvation comes only through trusting in Jesus as Savior. Ok, fair enough. Here is what I found alarming. 74% of evangelicals agreed with the statement, "Individuals must contribute to their own salvation." 71% agreed that "Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God." 56% said "Amen" when asked to affirm "The Holy Spirit is a force, not a personal being." 48% were fine with the statement "God accepts the worship of all religions including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam." 42% had no problem with this belief, "Worshiping alone or with one's family is a way to replace church." And 39% agreed "My good deeds help to earn my place in heaven." Each of those beliefs is profoundly unbiblical. None of them represent the Christian faith accurately. Self-examination gives us the opportunity to evaluate what we believe and why we believe it. As we grow in our faith, self-examination means discarding some beliefs, adjusting other beliefs, and adopting some new ones. Self-examination gives the Holy Spirit an opportunity to move us closer to God's truth.

What needs to be examined? Well, secondly, my life needs to reflect God's standards. That was the other part of the problem there at Corinth. Paul had to call them out on some very specific lifestyle issues. Some of those new believers in Corinth were stubbornly holding onto sexual immorality. "Run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body." (1 Cor 6:18 NLT) Others wanted to continue to access the feasts at temples built to honor false gods because it was an integral part of the culture there in Corinth. But, to do so was to get involved in idolatry. "So, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols." (1 Cor 10:14 NLT) Then, there were the church pot-lucks where Communion was observed, but the rich Christians were hoarding their food and embarrassing poor believers. "What? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace God's church and shame the poor?" (1 Cor. 11:22 NLT)

When Paul said, "Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine" (2 Cor 13:5 NLT), he meant the whole Jesus way of life when he spoke about "your faith." Our faith includes our doctrines and beliefs, but it addresses our lifestyle just as much. Our morals. Our conduct. How we treat other people like other believers, like people far from God, like the poor, like people from a different ethnicity than we are, like refugees and immigrants. How we handle money. How we use words. What we value and what we prioritize. The way we live out our everyday lives is what matters most when it comes to determining whether our claim to be followers of Jesus is authentic. Most

non-Christians can't evaluate the authenticity of our faith in Jesus just by knowing what we believe. Having your doctrine right means nothing to them. But the way we live out our everyday lives speaks volumes to them. It's on that basis they think we're authentic or hypocrites. Some good, old-fashioned self-examination will move us in the right direction. No, of course, we're never going to fulfill all of God's standards perfectly this side of Heaven. But am I "reflecting" them? Are they increasingly becoming more visible in my life? Can others see it? Am I at least making some progress and moving in the right direction? Self-examination can reveal the truth.

When or how can I examine myself? It can literally happen anywhere at any time. It's most appropriate when we're in an attitude of prayer. An example of that is found in the Old Testament when the psalmist prayed, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life." (Ps 139:23-24 NLT) You can pray that prayer – or something like it – in a worship service, in a personal devotional time in your home, or even just riding around in your car. Self-examination starts when we are quiet in God's presence and then invite Him to search our hearts and reveal anything there that offends Him. Here's a third question to ask and try to answer.

HOW CAN SELF-EXAMINATION BE SUCCESSFUL?

Someone could argue, "Isn't authentic self-examination impossible ultimately? If we're sinful and subject to self-deception, how can we ever be confident that examining ourselves is going to have a good result?" I think our passage today hints at two good answers to that question. First, let's remember God wants to build me up, not tear me down. Paul wrote here, "For I want to use the authority the Lord has given me to strengthen you, not to tear you down." (2 Cor 13:11 NLT) Now, that was Paul's attitude toward the Corinthians despite all their conflicts with each other. You can be sure that's God's attitude towards you and me all day and every day. He wants us to succeed spiritually, not to fail. He's not about discouraging you to become more like Jesus, but to encourage you at every step along life's journey. The Bible says, "If God is for us, who can ever be against us?" (Rom 8:31 NLT) He wants you to be successful in following Jesus far more than even you want to be.

How can self-examination be successful? There's an even greater and more compelling answer. Remember Jesus indwells me through the Holy Spirit. Don't overlook what Paul wrote here, "Surely you know that Jesus Christ is among you; if not, you have failed the test of genuine faith." (2 Cor. 13:5 NLT) Ultimately, the ability to examine or test yourself accurately isn't based on you at all. Instead, it's based on the fact Jesus Himself lives within your spirit. Ultimately, that's what makes you a Christian – an authentic, genuine, real follower of Jesus. Not your doctrine or your beliefs. Not even a godly lifestyle. The real test is the presence of Jesus in your life and mine.

The Bible says, "The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you." (Rom 8:11 NLT) Again, God's Word declares, "And this is the secret: Christ lives in you. This gives you assurance of sharing his glory." (Col 1:27 NLT) Those are good self-

examination questions to ask ourselves from time to time, by the way. “Jesus, are You truly in me? Lord, what proof is there of You living Your life through me?” If Jesus doesn’t indwell us, then – yes – authentic and accurate self-examination is going to be difficult if not impossible. It’s Jesus who provides the enlightenment, the discernment, and the correction we need when we come before Him sincerely. He knows how to do it well. He’s not into either rationalization or condemnation. Meaning what? On the one hand, He can make sure we’re not looking at ourselves through rose-colored glasses. We tend to rationalize or make excuses for ourselves. But, on the other hand, Jesus can convict us without condemning us. Remember God is about building us up, not tearing us down. Paul concluded this great letter with the assurance that because God loves us, any self-examination will yield good results. “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Cor 13:14 NLT) It all begins when we receive the grace that comes through Jesus. A wonderful result of knowing Jesus’ grace is the revelation of how much our Father in Heaven loves us. And then the ultimate result of Jesus’ grace and the Father’s love is the fellowship we experience with the Holy Spirit.

British bicycle racing was in a desperate situation. Since 1908, British bicycle race riders had won just a single Olympic gold medal. Their performance was so consistently bad that a top manufacturer in Europe refused to sell bikes to the team because it was afraid it would hurt sales if other professionals saw the Brits using their gear. Then Dave Brailsford was hired to fix British bicycle racing. What made Brailsford different was his relentless commitment to searching for a tiny margin of improvement in everything they did. He said, “You break down everything that goes into riding a bike. Then you improve everything by just 1% and you’ll get a significant increase when you put them all together.” So, Brailsford and his team made small adjustments in hundreds of different areas. They redesigned the bike seats for more comfort. They rubbed alcohol on the tires for a better grip. The coach had the riders switch to lighter and more aerodynamic indoor racing suits. As these 1% improvements accumulated, the results came faster than anyone could have imagined. In just five years the British cycling team dominated the cycling events at the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing. They won an astounding 60% of the gold medals available. Four years later, at the London Olympic Games, the team set nine Olympic records and seven world records.

True, sometimes God asks us to make radical changes in our lives. But sometimes through self-examination, God may also ask us to make small adjustments. In other words, 1% changes. Where is God asking you to make a 1% adjustment? Those changes are often simple, but as you continue to obey the Lord and ask him to change you, those 1% changes can make a huge difference in how you follow Jesus.

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? An essential part of following Jesus well is the ability to examine yourself in the Holy Spirit’s light and love. The purpose is not to discourage you, but instead to encourage and equip you to follow Jesus better. God wants to build you up, never tear you down. And through the Holy Spirit, He’s put Jesus inside of you. “And this is the secret: Christ lives in you.”