

Spiritual Bleep Test

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[0 : 00] Thanks, Emma, so much for reading. My name's Martin Ayers. I'm the senior pastor here. Hello. Great to see you. Great to have people in the room.

It means a lot. Great if you're watching at home. Sorry you can't be with us, but you are with us in spirit. And it'd be a great help to me if you could have a Bible to hand as we look at this last section of this Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

Or if you're in the church, we've got it on the sheets there, and there's some points there. To help us as we go through. Let's pray and ask for God's help. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of your word and the gift of your spirit bringing your word to us today.

We ask that you will open your words to our hearts, and you'll open our hearts to your word. In Jesus' name, amen. I don't know whether you saw this week, but it was the end of an era because the carmaker Ford announced that they're going to stop making the Ford Mondeo, and it's caused much grief among Mondeo men up and down the UK.

I think they're usually men, maybe women as well. And Jeremy Clarkson and the team that people know from Top Gear and now the Grand Tour were so upset when they heard the news.

[1 : 19] They'd heard in advance last year that the Mondeo's days were numbered, that they organized a memorial service. Lincoln Cathedral, Lincoln Cathedral hosted all these people who arrived in their Ford Mondeos, and they sang, Dear Ford and Father of Mankind, in the church.

And I thought to myself, you know, I mean, that's just a bit of fun, obviously, but if you're in a church where when you gather, instead of praising the Lord, you find yourself praising the Ford, you probably have an idea.

There's something not quite right here in my spiritual life. I'm probably not on the right track. But there are other ways. What we're learning in 2 Corinthians is that there are other ways that are much harder to spot that we might end up not on the right track in our spiritual lives.

In 2 Corinthians, we're hearing about a church that was planted by an apostle, by the Apostle Paul, and yet had lost its way. They were still using the language of Jesus, of the gospel, but something has gone wrong, and they've not been able to discern that the new leaders they've gone for instead of Paul are teaching a different message, and they've been led astray.

Now, we get to the end of the letter, and after Paul has spent time defending what authentic Christian ministry looks like, proclaiming Christ in weakness, and after he has spoken in chapters 8 and 9 to the elements of the church that are still with him about the opportunity to give money, and then spoken in chapters 10 to 13, 10 to 12, about the people who are still standing against him and defending himself, he gives this final section as he speaks in advance of coming to see them again, and what he says is he wants them to test themselves before he arrives.

[3 : 05] You see it in chapter 13, verse 5. Just have a look there. It's the key verse, really, for this morning. Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.

We've got used to testing ourselves, haven't we, over the past year? We certainly got more used to testing with COVID, and there's numerous people, I mean, my wife Kathy, because she's a medic, we've got these tests in our house, lateral flow tests.

She has to keep testing herself, and if she finds that she's got COVID, she then has to take action, of course, to protect others. But there are times when we have to test ourselves to protect ourselves, and one example of that might be the bleep test.

If you're involved in a sports team and in pre-season training, you do a bleep test to test your fitness, and the idea is if you fail, if you don't do very well on the bleep test, you take action now before the real test of actually being in a sports match against opponents.

Now, this morning, we're being given by Paul this urgent request, test yourself spiritually, and the reason is to ask, am I on the right track spiritually?

[4 : 15] And the reason we need to get this right is because the real test is coming. Jesus is alive, and one day we'll all stand before him, and we need to make sure that we're right with him when we stand before him.

For the Corinthian church, they've got a precursor to that return of Christ, that day when they meet Jesus, and it's that Paul is going to visit them. So if you look at verse 1 of chapter 13, he describes his next visit in quite judicial language.

He quotes an Old Testament quote about the law courts. He says, this will be my third visit to you. Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

So he's speaking as though when he comes, he might have to exercise the role of a judge among them. And we know that when Jesus returns, he will judge us.

And he said in the Sermon on the Mount, there will be surprises on that day, very uncomfortable surprises. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

[5 : 25] And so he reassures his people in some of his teaching that there will be people for whom he'll say, well done, good and faithful servant, those who've trusted him and their hearts have been right with God through him.

But there will be other people where he will say to them, I never knew you, even though they appear to do great things in Jesus' name. Now for the church in Corinth, Paul coming is this opportunity for him to take action among the church.

So if you look again, if you look down where he says that language in chapter 13, verse 1, in verse 2 he says, I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent.

On my return, I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others. So what's going on there? He's describing what we might call today church discipline.

Church discipline is not, this is not the situation where someone might say, I've done something terrible or I'm falling into repeated patterns of sin in my life.

[6 : 30] I know it's wrong. I want to change. I need help. And the church surrounds that with restorative prayer and looks to help somebody walk through their life changing.

We're all in that kind of position to an extent as Christians. That's the ordinary Christian life of becoming convicted of ways we need to change and seeking the help and prayer, the power to change.

But church discipline comes in where someone is saying that what they're saying or the way they live their life is clearly inconsistent with God's word and they don't see it as a problem.

They're not repenting of it. And in that kind of situation, the Bible gives us guidance on how to exercise church discipline. And Paul is saying as he comes to Corinth that he would have to do that. There would be some sort of public distancing from the people in the church who by their life or by their words go against the Bible and they're not turning from it. And it might include fencing the table as it's sometimes called, saying that those people can't have bread and wine at communion.

[7 : 39] Now the aim of church discipline is always restorative. It's not to condemn someone. It's to publicly demonstrate to them that they are that they're not in a good place spiritually so that they repent of that and can be welcomed back with great joy.

And Paul is hoping he doesn't have to impose church discipline on them. So he writes in advance to say, I'm coming, examine yourselves, test yourselves so they can take action.

And if they manage to take action and put things right in their own hearts with God, he might look weak when he comes. So he says that in verse 9 if you have a look down.

We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong and our prayer is that you may be fully restored. This is why I write these things when I'm absent that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority.

The authority the Lord gave me for building you up not for tearing you down. So you see what he's saying? He's hoping that he'll be able to affirm them and encourage them and there'll be mutual joy from his visit.

[8 : 47] But to get there he needs them to test themselves. So first of all we see Paul explaining that he passes their test. He passes the test of being an authentic Christian leader and that's our

first point.

The test of love that pours out for others' progress. So Paul has been writing to people who've been rejecting him and now he tells them what goes on in the heart of an authentic apostle and by implication we can think this is what a mature Christian looks like.

This is the heart of a mature Christian being described. Have a look at verse 15. It's on the screen there verse 15. I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.

If I love you more will you love me less? And then in verse 19 he tells us why he'd spend himself.

Verse 19 Have you been thinking all along that we've been defending ourselves to you?

We've been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ and everything we do dear friends is for your strengthening. If we're really ambitious for something we do make sacrifices in our lives to make it happen don't we?

[9 : 59] That's a kind of truism of life. There was a man Walter Carr who got in the news because he got a job that he really wanted really wanted a job it was with a moving company Bellhops and he didn't have a car and he knew that he wouldn't get the job if he admitted that so he didn't tell them and then on his first day his appointment his first meeting with a client was 20 miles from his home so he got up at midnight to walk to this house to make sure that he was there on time to meet this client but word reached the chief executive of Bellhops that Walter was behaving like this and he took him for lunch and at the end of lunch he handed him a set of keys and they gave him a car because they were so impressed with the sacrifices he was making for his job.

Well the Apostle Paul says that he spends everything he has and even himself and he does it gladly what for? Verse 19 everything we do dear friends is for your strengthening for their strengthening in faith we've heard in chapter 11 of this letter some of the costs to Paul of his mission work of his ministry he talked about persecution about being flogged about travelling around the Roman Empire to plant churches and being in danger he talked about being in danger from bandits about being hungry and wishing he had food about being cold and wishing he had more clothes about being shipwrecked spending a night and day on the open sea but here he tells us that he spends himself gladly to see people strengthened in their faith in Jesus what's caused him great anxiety in this letter isn't the cost to him of his work of his ministry it's seeing them struggling in faith weak in faith and it challenges us about what we would be willing to pour ourselves out for what really makes us tick

I remember a few years ago at a different church leading a Bible study group and at the end of one evening after time in the Bible and then prayer we came up we were just chatting afterwards and one of the guys in the group asked me about something I can't even remember what it was it would have been very trivial and I got excited talking about it and this guy laughed and said now he's excited it was such a painful thing to hear as though I must have been opening the word of God with people and hadn't seemed particularly bothered all evening and then he'd asked me about something like a new jacket or something or a film and I'd got really excited well we look at the heart of Paul the Christian servant leader and we see a heart that would gladly pour himself out not for himself but for the progress of other people in their faith that's what would give him joy and if you're involved in a ministry of any kind one at St Silas leading a small group hosting a small group involved in children's ministry youth ministry and you find it draining let's be encouraged by this that we will find it draining it is draining because serving others in a role of leadership in a church is to an extent about pouring ourselves out for their strengthening but it's worth it there is nothing better and maybe we some of us will need to reset ourselves into that as we grow out of lockdown as we're all hoping over the coming weeks some of us will have had to get used to a very insular life quite an isolated life but as we come out from it let's try and focus and pray for the priorities not to spend all our time thinking about the things that we can do that we missed out on but rather be thinking about how we can look to others and their strengthening in faith could you pray could you pray for some other Christians maybe some Christian flatmates or Christians in your small group just two or three Christian friends for their strengthening in faith maybe commit to make that a daily prayer that God would so grow them in their faith that even though we're surrounded by people who have forgotten God and who pay no attention to Jesus they would be unshakable in their convictions that Jesus is real so that they wouldn't be strangled of joy in their Christian lives by doubts and struggles to believe but they would go on in thankfulness and perseverance and patience and endurance and hope they would have great living hope could you pray that for other people and look to encourage them in that in your life that would give us joy so that's our first test here the test of love that pours

out for others faith then Paul tells us tells the church what they should look for as they test themselves in this way he describes in chapter 13 verse 5 it's the test of love that bears practical fruit and the striking thing is how down to earth this test is it's not about whether you've done a catechism and how many memory verses you've managed to pack into your head have a look at verse 20 he says of them about his visit for I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be and you may not find me as you want me to be does he really mean there that he would have to come not affirming them but rebuking them I fear that there may be discord jealousy fits of rage selfish ambition slander gossip arrogance and disorder I'm afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged so look at that combination Paul's principal concern here is that they're on the right tracks with Jesus that they're trusting the true Jesus they're holding to the truth how do they test that by looking at whether there's fruit of it in their lives in repentance from a self-centered way of life and looking to live for God and each of us can apply the same kind of test to ourselves for some of us this will be a deeply challenging morning as we're called to face up to well where am I really with Jesus myself have I drifted have I never really quite been there we do need to be careful as we test ourselves

[16:49] I remember Gemma Brown at my school you may have had a Gemma Brown type character at your school there's usually one or several whenever we had exams at school Gemma Brown was the girl who always came out in tears that was awful I failed my questions didn't come up I failed it was a nightmare total disaster and you know the people like that then results day came round Gemma Brown top of the class every time she'd always crush the exams some of us have a tender conscience when it comes to being tested and it might be that you're someone who shouldn't be lacking assurance but as soon as you read that we're to test ourselves it sends you off into oh no maybe I'm not a real Christian maybe look at it with a friend seek the counsel of a friend who knows you who might say look I don't think you've got anything to worry about for others maybe we do need a wake up call we need to think well hang on a minute where do I stand have I really turned from my old way of life am I seeking to live God's way because of what

I've come to believe about him of course we'll still see sin in our lives it's important to recognise that often the more we grow as a Christian the more aware we become of how unworthy we are we become sins in our life that have always been there we come to see them as wrong and maybe we didn't see that before so that will always be there and we ought to remember that when we stand before God our righteousness will come from Jesus he's lived the life we should have lived he's died the death we should have died and our sin will not take away our righteousness because it's his righteousness that we'll be clothed in if we're trusting him so we're found in him but when we when we look at our lives we should see that fundamentally that coming to trust Jesus has meant our lives have changed direction now the fundamental direction of our life is not away from God anymore it's towards God and so we are we're seeking to live God's way

God's character has moved us to repentance so the fruit of obedience in our lives doesn't save us but it is the evidence of a genuine faith and genuine faith will always be accompanied by that kind of fruit the fruit I guess we see in verse 20 that instead of being jealous of other people we'll be able to thank God for the gifts he's given them instead of fits of rage we will be growing in patience in our lives that we be aiming for sexual purity verse 21 living according to God's design with our bodies that we be striving verse 20 for good relationships in our church and in our lives you know instead of doing the thing that people do of you fall out with someone so you just decide to avoid them for the rest of your life as Christians we're trying to resolve differences and seek forgiveness from people and seek their apology if we feel they've wronged us this hard work of making our relationships healthy and loving so not that we're the finished article but that we could say you know what I look at my life and I know

I'm not the person that I should be and I know I'm not the person that I will be but by the grace of God I'm not the person that I was there are signs in my life that there are things I do because of what I now believe about Jesus that's what we're looking for as we test ourselves and a strong piece of evidence in that battle evidence in that test is simply that we're in the battle that there are things in our lives that we recognize are not right and we love to change so you don't fail the test of verse 20 there if gossip is a problem in your life but you fail the test if you don't think gossip is a problem if you're not recognizing that it's not right and looking to change are you in the battle so for

St Silas to be a living church it's not that we never see selfish ambition or slander or arrogance we see those things in our lives we're broken but it's that we're a community where we don't accept that we confess sin to others and to God especially and we're looking to support each other to pursue holiness that's what we long for and if we can't see anything like that in our lives we should be concerned about that we should be concerned what do I really think of Jesus and these words remember they're giving us a loving warning not to make us feel condemned but so that we can take action we can look at Jesus afresh but how do we change we can't just say to ourselves stop that

I'm going to stop that from now on and I'm going to do this instead it's just not how we work we saw in the news this week didn't we about this massive ship that's as long as the Empire States building is tall stuck in the Suez Canal 12% of the trade of the entire world needs to get through that canal and the ship the Evergreen has blocked it and when the news came out what was far more alarming than seeing the ship stuck and the traffic jam of ships behind it was that there was a little digger over to the right hand side trying to get it out and you looked at it and thought this is going to take a while isn't it to get the Suez Canal clear digger well look if that ship is a picture of my life the direction of my life my heart blown off course in my sin it's extremely difficult to redirect back to God well the digger is me when I put me at the heart of my change project it's just not going to work and the apostle

[23 : 00] Paul tells us where we should be turning in our third point it's the test of love that depends on the living God so have a look with me at verse 7 and we just see several times as Paul finishes the letter how what he's looking for is dependence on God and God to invade the lives of these people so look at verse 7 now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong not so that people will see that we have stood the test but so that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed it's there again in verse 9 our prayer is that you may be fully restored our prayer verse 11 he sums up finally brothers and sisters rejoice strive for full restoration encourage one another be of one mind live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you so it's as the God of love and peace is with them that they'll be able to sort out their community and then in the last verse may the grace of the

Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all so these are the marks that the living God has invaded the local church and invaded our lives it's the mark of all about that earlier in the letter he talked about how his ministry is not to deceive people but to set forth the truth about Jesus plainly why because chapter 3 he says that his ministry is one that's empowered by the Holy Spirit chapter 3 verse 17 now the Lord is the Spirit now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom and it's changed by it so look at verse 18 of chapter 3 we all who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory which comes from the

Lord who is the Spirit so when you're trusting Jesus because of the Holy Spirit's work in your life and you spend time with Jesus the Spirit enables Jesus to rub off on you he rubs off on us and more and more we start to become more like him as we're moved by his love as we're inspired by the brilliance of his life and if we're feeling convicted by the challenges of this end of this letter this morning and a number of us will be it's great to be looking at this as we head into Easter together as we come out of lockdown and maybe you feel you've not done well in lockdown spiritually lots of us will be feeling that we've not done well with the people we live with or in our spiritual lives for all kinds of reasons it's great to be looking ahead to Easter week and remembering that the means to put things right are prayerfully depending on the spirit and looking at the cross and the resurrection of

Jesus and on Friday we're going there are two ways to meet the risen Jesus we see them in two Corinthians there are two ways we'll meet the risen Jesus one is standing before him on judgment day completely unprepared for his conquering power but the other way is coming to him today and meeting him by his spirit as he draws alongside us and empowers us to trust him and to change he does that by us fixing our eyes on him so as we head into this week let's seek to do that together as a community with friends looking to ask God for the resurrection power to live a new life by his spirit that bears fruit for him in practical ways let's pray together heavenly father we thank you for this loving challenge in your word this morning that we would examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith help us heavenly father with sober judgment to test ourselves not that we would lack assurance if we should have it but that by your spirit working in our lives our trust in

Jesus will overflow in a love that's willing to pour ourselves out for others and bear practical fruit in our lives that would give us confidence that we are in Christ for our joy and for your glory amen
users to you