

A Closer Look



Examining Who We Are
And Who We Want To Be

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Justin Morton

Something To Think About

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Other Books by Justin:

Help! Someone I Love Has Died

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A CLOSER LOOK

WEEK 1: EXAMINING YOUR PAST

TEST! I have been out of graduate school for several years now, and I still have a strong dislike for this word. I have never enjoyed taking tests and I know very few people who do. In fact, when talking to individuals about school, tests are the most often mentioned reason for one having a strong dislike for school.

QUESTION: What is the main reason you do not enjoy taking test?

Like most of you, there were several reasons I never enjoyed taking tests. For one thing, I did not like to spend the time studying. I had much rather been playing some sports or spending time with my friends, anything but studying. Another reason I didn't enjoy test was because I usually did not have the best notes to help in my study prep. My notes were always very sporadic. The two reasons above certainly contributed to my least favorite reason for taking tests...because of the results that would follow. Because I didn't enjoy studying for test and because my notes were sometimes not complete, the results would often times be less than pleasant. This doesn't mean I failed every test, it just means I there were lots of times where I didn't do as well as I should have.

However, as much as I fail to enjoy test and all that comes with them, tests serve a valuable purpose. They help us make an assessment on what is or isn't known. Without tests, there would be no measuring stick.

BIBLICAL EXAMS

QUESTION: Do you think the Bible speaks of exams and tests?

The Bible is not excluded from the practice of examinations. Notice some of the passages we find in the word of God concerning examinations:

- *David reflected on how God gave a test to examine his heart (Psa. 17:3).*

- *Jeremiah exhorted Israel to take an exam of their ways (Lam. 3:40).*

- *Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers to examine themselves when it came to the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:28).*

- *Paul exhorted the Galatians to take an exam on their work in the Lord (Gal. 6:4).*

- *Paul even encouraged the Corinthians to examine themselves and see if they were in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5-6).*

Friends, we need to take an examination of our lives and see where we stand with God. As we begin this self-examination, let's begin with our past. We could spend a lot of time talking about examining our past, but let's focus on just a couple of aspects of our past.

ATTITUDE

QUESTION: Why would examining our past attitude be of importance?

Attitude is something we take notice of in our society. We look at people and say, "Now there's a person with a great attitude" or "Would you look at her, she has a bad attitude." When you consider your past attitude, what's it look like? Are you a person who has an attitude of love? The apostle Paul tells us that we can have faith that moves mountains, give all our possessions to feed the poor and even surrender our bodies to be burned, yet without love, it profits us nothing (I Cor. 13:1-3). It doesn't matter what we do, if we lack love, we fail to meet God's expectations for His children.

Jesus was approached and asked by a lawyer which command was the greatest.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost command.”

- Matthew 22:36-38

What’s interesting to me is after Jesus answered the question He added these words,

“The second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

- Matthew 22:39-40

The lawyer only asked about the greatest command. He didn’t ask about the second greatest command. Jesus felt it was important to point out the importance of loving your neighbor to a guy who was only asking Jesus this question in order to test Him (Matt. 22:35).

Not only do we need to have an attitude of love, but we need to have an attitude of forgiveness. We all know people in our lives that have wronged us or hurt us. One of the hardest things to do is forgive that person. Jesus teaches we are to forgive others of their transgressions if we expect our heavenly Father to forgive us of our transgressions (Matt. 6:14-5). I have heard it said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.” Whether or not this statement is true, makes little difference. If we want God to forgive us, we must be willing to forgive others no matter how difficult that may be.

Unfortunately, some people continue to wrong us time and time again. What about those people? Doesn’t there come a point when we no longer have to forgive them? Jesus was asked this very question by the apostle Peter.

“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?”

Up to seven times?” Jesus said, “I do not say to you,

up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven”

- Matthew 18:21-22

Thus, according to Jesus if a brother sins against us 490 times, come that 491st time we no longer have to forgive, right? NO! Jesus was not putting a number on forgiveness. He was stressing that forgiveness is an attitude that we must all employ.

REPRESENTATION

QUESTION: What does it mean to represent something? How might a poor representation effect the people or institutions we are representing?

When you think about the way you represented your family in the past, what comes to mind? A representation that made your family proud or a representation that embarrassed your family?

**“Let your father and mother be glad,
and let her rejoice who gave birth to you.”**

- Proverbs 23:25

It's important for us to remember that our family has worked hard to make a good name for themselves. We need to be careful in how we represent that name. We should always be mindful of the fact, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches” (Prov. 22:1). We should want nothing more than to leave our family a good name.

We should not only consider how we have represented our family, but we should also consider how we have represented our Lord and His church. The church does not belong to you, me, the elders, or any other man other than Jesus Christ.

“Upon this rock I will build my church.”

- Matthew 16:18

Jesus purchased His church with His blood (I Pet. 1:18-19). When you consider your past representation of the Lord’s church, how would you rate yourself. Have you been representing in a manner that would be pleasing to the Lord? When people look at the way you are living your life, is God glorified? Jesus said, “Let your lights shine in such a way that others may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). The manner in which we represent the Lord and His church has a great impact on whether or not people will choose to be a part of the Lord’s church.

Friends, the first part of our self-examination is to consider our past. How did you do? If your self-examination has revealed things about your past that are not what you would like them to be, stop right now and spend time in prayer asking God to help you in these areas.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you think people find it so hard to think about their past? Are there benefits to examining your past?
2. Should the fact that the Bible speaks of exams mean something for our own personal lives? What should it mean?
3. Why should Christians have an attitude of love and forgiveness?
4. What makes it hard to have an attitude of love and forgiveness?
5. Why is a good representation important to our family? To the Lord?

A CLOSER LOOK

WEEK 2: FOCUSING ON YOUR PRESENT

Have you ever heard the statement, “There’s no better time than the present?” This saying is used often in order to motivate people to take a certain action. I have had it said to me many times and have even utter such words to others hoping to motivate them to take action.

Although these words ring true from a physical standpoint, do they not also ring true from a spiritual standpoint? Isn’t right now (the present) the best time to take certain actions that will help us in our walk with God?

QUESTION: What area of your life would you say presently needs some action taken in order to enhance your walk with God?

Let’s consider a few areas of our lives that are generally the most common areas that need some examining done.

CONDUCT

When you think about your conduct, both in and outside of the worship assembly, what word would you use to describe that conduct? If there is one area of our lives that could probably use some examining, it’s most likely our everyday conduct, right? We all have had those moments we are embarrassed about when it comes to the way we acted in a certain situation. If you are like me, you just hope those moments are few and far between. Paul told the Philippians that their conduct should be in a manner that is worthy of the Gospel (Phil. 1:27). No matter what happened to them, he wanted them to live like Christians. Have you ever been in a situation that made it hard to be a Christian? Maybe it was working in an

office surrounded by non-Christians or being in a school where it seemed very few people had any morals or values. Paul says that it doesn't matter the situation you are in, our conduct should always represent the Gospel.

I understand this is not always easy. We have to remember Paul was writing these words from prison. That couldn't have been an easy situation for him. What he is asking the church at Philippi to do is nothing short of what he himself was doing.

“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”

- Philippians 1:12-13

Paul says that his imprisonment had helped to advance the spread of the Gospel. Even in prison, Paul conducted himself in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

What about our present conduct? Are we living in a manner that is worthy of the Gospel? It's important that all of us remember that the way we conduct ourselves makes a big impression on the people around us. They will either be impressed or disgusted by our conduct. It is my hope and prayer that we conduct ourselves in a manner that inspires others to live differently.

“And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”

- Philippians 1:14

Paul's conduct even in prison made a huge impression on others. Could the same be said about our everyday conduct (I Tim. 4:12)?

QUESTION: What is the hardest part of daily living a life that is worthy of the Gospel?

SPEECH

The tongue is very powerful. In fact, there are few things more powerful.

“For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.”

- James 3:2

Why would a person, who could keep from stumbling in what he says, be considered a perfect man? James goes on to tell us,

“But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil full of deadly poison.”

- James 3:8

He would be considered perfect because no man can tame the tongue. It's too powerful. Since the tongue is so powerful, it's vital that we are careful to use our speech for good. One way to do this is by using our words to build others up.

“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.”

- Ephesians 4:29

Have you ever had someone say something to tear you down? It's not a pleasant feeling is it? The wise man described reckless words as sword thrusts (Prov. 12:18). Just thinking

about how we use our words to stab someone like one does with a sword is painful. We must be careful not to use our speech in a way that tears others down.

Also, when considering your speech, is your speech used for godly communication? Paul told the church at Ephesus that there should be no filthiness or foolish talk out of their mouths (Eph. 5:4). How many times have you said something that could be considered filthy or foolish? I'm afraid if we are honest with ourselves, the answer is probably more times than we care to remember.

We've all been down this road before, perhaps in ways we have never considered. Take gossip as an example. Wouldn't using our speech for this kind of talk be considered ungodly? The Bible has a lot to say about gossipers, whispers, backbiters, etc.

*“Where there is no wood the fire goes out,
and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.”*

- Proverbs 26:20

Friends, we must be careful not to use our speech for ungodly communication.

Perhaps the best way to use our speech is for giving thanks. When Paul told the Ephesians there should be no filthiness or foolish talk out of their mouths, he ended with, “But rather giving of thanks” (Eph. 5:4). I know of no better way to use our tongues than to offer thanks to God for all that He has done for us. He has blessed us with far more than we ever deserved (Jam. 1:17).

QUESTION: How often do you use your speech to offer up prayers of thanksgiving for all the good things that God has done for you?

Just as we have past areas of our lives that we need to reflect on and ask God's forgiveness, we also have current areas of our lives that we need to be surveying daily and asking God to help us live each day in a way that brings Him glory and honor.

“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

- Matthew 5:16

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How can the way we live be used for the good of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ?
2. How do you think Paul was able to live such a godly life even when he found himself in prison?
3. In what ways we can use our words to built others up?
4. What are some steps we can take in order to help us guard against using our words for ungodly communication?
5. Praying to God is one of the best ways we can use our words. What are some of the blessings we need to be thanking God for on a daily basis?

A CLOSER LOOK

WEEK 3: CHOOSING YOUR FUTURE

Examining our past is difficult because there isn't much we can do to change it. Typically, one of the only positives that can come from the past is that there is usually a future. The great thing about examining our future is we have the opportunity to choose our future. What do you want your future to be? In the end, everyone's future will be one of two places.

HEAVEN

When I think about the future I can't help but think about heaven. I want heaven to be my future more than anything else. What about you?

QUESTION: What comes to your mind when you think about heaven?

Consider if you will a few reasons why I want heaven to be my future.

Heaven is Being Prepared by our Lord!

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”

– John 14:1-3

At this very moment the Lord is preparing a special place for you and me. How awesome that the one who died to save us is the one who is preparing a place for us to return home to.

Heaven is Beautiful Beyond Description!

**“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love Him.”**

- I Corinthians 2:9

WOW! Paul says, “You can’t even begin to imagine what the Lord is preparing for you.” When you stop and take in all the beauty around you realize this...it was all created by God. And if God created the world and everything it, how much more beautiful will Heaven be. It’s going to be even better than we can imagine.

Heaven is the Dwelling Place of God!

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.’”

- Revelation 21:3

I want heaven to be my future because God, the creator and sustainer of the universe will be there. How incredible it will be to spend eternity in the presence of God almighty!

Heaven is a Place of No More Tears, Pain, or Death!

**“And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes;
and there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain;
for the former things have passed away.”**

- Revelation 21:4

When I think about this life and the things about it that I do not like, I think about all the heartache, pain and tears. Most of us have experienced a fair amount of pain and shed probably more tears than we can recall. Perhaps a lot of our pain and tears were caused by the death of those we loved. I look forward to my future being heaven so that I won't have to experience any more pain, tears or death.

Heaven is a Place of Homecoming!

After David's child he conceived with Bathsheba died, he longed for the day that he could be reunited with Him again in heaven (2 Sam. 12:23). I have lost some people I love dearly. Not a day goes by that I don't think about them and miss them. I look forward to my future being heaven so that I can be reunited with them once again around the throne of God.

Heaven will Last Forever!

When you think about our Lord preparing a special place for us in the dwelling place of God, that is going to be more beautiful than we can fathom, where we will know no sadness and be reunited with our loved ones who have gone on before, the only thing that could make this place any better is the fact that it will last forever. Friends, it doesn't get any better than that!

**“Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up
together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,
and so we will always be with the Lord.”**

- Thessalonians 4:17

Our future can be HEAVEN if we so choose by submitting our lives to the will of God and being buried in the watery grave of baptism (Rom. 6; Acts 2). It's a wonderful option for our future and one I am sure you all long for. Examine your life and choose to make heaven a part of your future. If heaven's not in our future, then there is only one other option, and it's not a very good option.

HELL

QUESTION: How many classes or sermons have you ever heard on the topic of hell?

I have heard very few sermons preached on hell over the course of my entire life. In fact, basically all I can ever remember hearing is that hell is a place no one wants to go. Other than that, I don't recall hearing too many specifics when it comes to this terrifying place.

Have you ever stop to think about why you don't want your future to be in hell? Let's consider a few reasons why we shouldn't want hell to be in our future.

Hell is a Place of Separation from God!

“And to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”

- 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9

Have you ever been away from someone you love for a long period of time? If you have then you understand how unpleasant it is. Friends, we were created for the purpose of having a relationship with God and communing with Him. The fact that a future in hell means being separated from God is a main reason I do not want to go there.

Hell is a Place of No Hope!

“And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.”

- Luke 16:26

When one reads the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), it becomes pretty apparent that the rich man was in a place where there was no hope. He was told that he could not pass from where he was in torment into the place where Lazarus was in the comfort of Abraham's bosom. No matter how bad he wanted out of hell, it was hopeless. If we find ourselves in hell someday, we will be without any hope.

Hell is a Place of Torment that Last Forever!

“And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”

- Revelations 14:11

I have had times in my life where I thought I was in torment or times where I was being tormented by someone. Each time that torment ended. For those whose future is hell, their torment will never end; they will have no rest day or night.

Hell was Prepared for the Devil and his Angels!

I think the most telling thing of all is that hell was not created for God's precious children. Hell was created for the devil and his angels.

“Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.”

- Matthew 25:41

I do not want hell to be my future because I do not want to spend all of eternity in the presence of the devil and his angels.

I'm sure if we were to take a poll, every person would say, "I want heaven to be my future." However, the sad reality is that most people will miss out on heaven.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”
- Matthew 7:21-23

Only those who do the will of God will have a future in heaven. For everyone else, their future is something to be dreaded, hell.

As you examine your life, what does your future look like? Do you see yourself enjoying a future in heaven with the creator of all things or in hell with the devil and his angels? Friends, I don't know what the future holds, but I do know that we have the opportunity to pick our future. I pick HEAVEN...what about you?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What excites you the most about a future in heaven?
2. If you were describing heaven to someone, how would you describe it?
3. What do you consider to be the worse part of a future in hell?
4. Why do you think it is that few sermons and classes are taught on the subject of hell?
5. What can you do to ensure that heaven is in your future?

A CLOSER LOOK

WEEK 4: THERE IS HOPE

As this series comes to a close, I would like to challenge each one of you to take a self-examination. Examine your attitude, conduct, speech, representation and your future. Unfortunately, sometimes exams like this bring to light things we need to improve on. I know there are certain things I need to work on to better live my life for the Lord. I'm striving daily to work on those things so I can be a better reflection of the one who lives in me.

Maybe after taking a self-examination you feel as though there is no way that heaven can be your future because the things in your past are too bad to overcome. Perhaps you feel that you have no hope. If this describes you, I have great news! God can take someone with a bad past, use them for his glory and change their future.

RAHAB

Perhaps you've heard about Rahab before. This woman had so many things going against her that it's hard to imagine her future being heaven. First, she was a woman. Women were viewed as second-class citizens. There was an old Jewish prayer that said, "I thank my God that I was not born a Gentile or a woman."

Second, she was a Canaanite from Jericho, which made her a pagan. Before the children of Israel entered the Promised Land, they were told that God would drive away many nations, including the Canaanites, and they (Israel) were to utterly destroy them (Deut. 7:1-2). Why? The Canaanites practiced all different types of sexual relations that Israel was told to avoid (Lev. 18). The Canaanites were evil people.

Third, Rahab was a harlot. Her profession is one that our society, even today, looks down upon. Rahab's past was unpleasant. She had three strikes against her and it would appear she was doomed. However, she was spared for her actions concerning the spies (Jos. 2)

when the Israelites defeated the city of Jericho (Jos. 6). From that day forward she remained with the Israelites.

If the story of Rahab ended there, we would be left wondering what might have been. Thanks be to God her story doesn't end at this point. As one reads in the New Testament one finds Rahab is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5) and is one of only two women mentioned in the great Hall of Faith (Heb. 11:31). It is pretty clear this woman with a bad past didn't let that keep her from having a bright future.

DAVID

Most people, even if they are not religious, have heard of David. David was handsome, powerful and perhaps most importantly, the king of Israel that was chosen by God. Yet, David had a pretty messed up past. He committed adultery with Bathsheba who was married to one of the soldiers (Uriah) in his army and she became pregnant. Instead of coming clean about the sin he committed, David tried to cover up his sin with lies and deception (2 Sam. 11:5-7). He called Uriah home from battle in order to cover his tracks; when this didn't work, David had Uriah murdered (2 Sam. 11:14-17).

Most people would read this and think that David was a man on a road to destruction. But that wasn't David. Yes, he made plenty of mistakes. We all do! However, David is well spoken of throughout the New Testament. It is clear he is a person who is held in high regard.

“But now your kingdom shall not continue. The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you.”

– I Samuel 13:14

David was described as a man after God's own heart. When you consider all this and not just his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, it's clear that David did not allow his past to keep him from having a bright future.

PAUL

When I think about someone whose past was almost too bad to overcome, I can't help but think about Paul. Before he encountered a name change he was known as Saul of Tarsus, a great persecutor of the early Christians. In fact, when Paul was giving a defense before King Agrippa he said,

“And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them.”

- Acts 26:10

Paul had a pretty rough past. Apparently he felt it was so bad that he would tell young Timothy,

“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.”

- I Timothy 1:15

Paul saw himself as the worst of all sinners, but God saw something else. God saw a man who was dedicated to what he was doing so God chose Paul. That's right. Paul was handpicked by God to serve as His instrument to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15) and that's exactly what he did, even considering his own life to be worthless except for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. Saul, a persecutor of Christians, became Paul, persecuted with Christians.

Don't Allow Your Past To Determine Your Future

Friends, I don't know what your self-examination revealed, but I know this...there is no past or present so bad that God can't help you overcome it. Rahab, David and Paul: Three people, three past and yet, three futures that were not determined by the past. Never allow your past to determine your future! Change your present situation with God and make heaven your eternal home.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are there times in your life where you feel as though you are hopeless because of your past?
2. What's one thing you find interesting about the life of Rahab? What can you learn from it?
3. What's one thing you find interesting about the life of David? What can you learn from it?
4. What's one thing you find interesting about the life of Paul? What can you learn from it?
5. What's the main lesson you will take away from this series of lessons on self-examination?