

Spiritual Health Check: First Things First

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[0 : 00] So this week and next week, you know, I looked ahead, best laid plans of mice and men, as the saying goes. I had a sermon series planned, which now is completely off track.

So this week and next week, I will be wrapping up our sermon series, Spiritual Health Check. And there are a couple really important topics that I wanted to cover that we won't get to, but maybe we'll get to them another time.

It is what it is. That's my new mantra, by the way. So we've been taking a look through this series. It's been a while now. So just a little refresher at what we've been doing, looking at some of the ways we can assess our spiritual health, the ways that we can identify the important things to which we need to pay attention.

So I have a question for you this morning. Do you like to watch TV? Yes. I'm not looking for weakness. I'm looking for strength. I love watching TV.

We like to watch TV. We like to watch documentaries a lot, actually. So if you watch TV and you're getting into watching a TV series, particularly when it's an ongoing story, each episode may begin with a bit of a recap.

[1 : 15] You may get an announcer-y voice that says, previously on CSI Miami, and then it shows you what's happened in an episode before. So it might be catching you up on a previous episode, reminding you of something that happened in the past.

Or even if it's at the start of a new season, reminding you of how you wasted all your time last year. No, no. And if you're more of a reader, I had to check this with Michelle because she is a voracious reader.

You may even recognize that some authors do this. Some authors will remind you of who a character is, will remind you of previous events in a prologue or something to a story in an ongoing series.

And sometimes that's to catch people up on previous events so you know where you're at, so you know where you are going forward. And we can recognize that TV newscasts do that as well. Throughout the newscast, if you watch the news, I tend to watch it probably more than I should, but a newscast will generally give periodic recaps of top stories or breaking news or updates on previous stories that they've reported on before.

[2 : 28] So is that general concept fairly familiar to you, would you say? So this morning we're going to have a bit of a recap of sorts, because we're going to revisit some of the spiritual disciplines we've explored together in the past.

And our sermon this morning is titled, First Things First. So I believe that as we seek to strengthen and deepen our spiritual lives and our walk with Jesus, it's never a bad idea to be reminded of what's important.

Reminded of where our priorities should be, even. I love a good fire. Now, I maybe need to qualify that statement a little bit.

I don't like to set them. I like to build them. So I particularly love a good fire in a fireplace on a cold day or a rainy day. And I love a roaring campfire.

I love to just sit by a fire. And I'm mesmerized by the flames and how things burn and just the heat and the comfort that it gives. But have you ever tried to build a good fire or watch someone else do it, and it seemed like a bit of a struggle?

[3 : 48] I have to confess, there have been times when I've been building a fire in our backyard fire pit, and I've used the lid of a Rubbermaid container to get more air volume, because I can't get the thing to start.

So maybe it seemed like no matter how much effort you put in, the fire wouldn't get going. The fire wouldn't build to the point where it seemed to be able to sustain itself.

I think anyone who builds campfires can recognize there's almost a sweet spot, where you don't have to feed it as much, but it begins to sustain itself.

And I can also, I'm going to confess, I can be an impatient fire builder. I just want it to ignite. And Michelle's not here, and she would say, there have been times when gasoline may have been involved.

Now, not often, but sometimes I just want it to go. I want it to ignite. I want it to flare up. I want it to establish itself.

[4 : 53] And maybe you can relate to that. But sometimes when we want to have a nice fire, we can forget that it takes time. It takes investment and effort.

And I just realized that's a perfect time for me to talk about this, because I forgot. So investment and effort. God is going, there's a good time to pause. Okay, here's my scrawled notes.

June 18th, I sliced my hand with a butcher knife about this long. We have lots of pictures, lots that are PG, and lots that are less PG.

So whatever you want to see, we're happy to show you. So how did it happen? That's an excellent question. So it's the day before Father's Day and Michelle's birthday, the night that we had tickets to see our favorite comedian at the Jubilee Auditorium.

I was getting supper ready. I was using the butcher knife to separate frozen sausages. Now, I have done this a thousand times. We have a block of knives.

[6 : 06] And Joan said to me, are they Cutco knives? And I said, they are. And she said, the only knives that I can think of that you would have for 20 plus years that are that sharp are these. And she's right. Somehow, this hand was not involved in the process at all.

Somehow, my hand slipped off the handle of the knife directly across the blade. Everybody's cringing, some people. We needed to put a bucket around, maybe.

So, good question. See, so last night I was trying to, I'm going to use the word dissect, which is unfortunate timing. But I tried to dissect what actually happened. So I've been thinking my hand must have been wet.

But if my hand had been wet on the handle and slid down, it would have slid across the back of the knife. So what happened? I don't know. So what I do know is it went down the knife.

I knew I had injured myself badly. And I saw the slice open. Grabbed the tea towel across the kitchen, put it directly on my hand, and ran outside to the deck and said, Michelle, we got to go to Emerge now.

[7 : 16] So we went directly over to the Misericordia, close to our house, which is good. They said, wow, you really did a number on it. So they stitched a bunch.

So lacerated across the end of this finger. None of us have any idea how I just caught the end. Then directly across the two middle fingers and at the bottom of my pinky.

So I'm going to use another ugly word. I severed several tendons across these fingers completely on my ring finger. So when I was sitting in emergency, it was hanging under its own weight and didn't look so great.

Yeah. Yeah. So the emergency doctor on Saturday said, some of these I'm going to stitch up just lightly because they'll need to be reopened again for them to repair.

Because I guarantee you've severed things in there. So they sent me for x-rays and things to make sure I hadn't broken any bones. I was bleeding. Like I said to one of the nurses, stuck pig.

[8 : 18] And she said, that's accurate. Sure. Sure. So they had initially thought they would send us right over to the university on Saturday to Plastics to have them do the surgery that night.

Didn't, weren't able to have that happen. So we went home. Then we went back on Sunday, Father's Day, where I sat and emerged for three hours for them to just change the dressing.

So is that fun? Not really. We were told at that point we had an appointment on the 21st, which was the following Monday, with the plastic surgeon at the K Clinic at the University Hospital.

So we were given the impression by Emerge that would be the operation day. So it turned out to be just another assessment. So they unwrapped everything, laid my hand out.

And first an intern came and checked everything. Doctor came and checked everything. And she said, yeah, I'd say you severed several things, checking nerve sensation. And I'm just, I'm thinking words that are not good words.

[9 : 19] And Michelle is, I can feel her fuming next to me. And so we finished this appointment with essentially, we'll get you in as soon as we can, but it's not today.

So we were pretty discouraged, and I'll be honest with you, I was sobbing, sitting in a chair in the hallway of that hospital because I thought, this is going to be dealt with, not today.

So we waited until Friday. So Friday morning, first thing, I went in, we got up at 5. We're at the hospital that morning.

I remember looking at the clock as I was wheeled into OR, and it was 20 to 9. So that was kind of the timing. They initially did a procedure on me, which is called a nerve block.

So if anybody knows what that is or has had it, the goal is to completely immobilize and numb the extremity. And what's involved with that is multiple local anesthetic injections in here, and then a needle about this long dug in multiple times from different directions to get bundles of nerve networks that reach down into your arm.

[10 : 35] Does it hurt? It does. I wouldn't recommend it, actually. So the goal was to freeze that and then give me a local, or just a sedation for surgery.

So I'm in. They're giving me the sedation. It partly froze my mouth and my neck in the process of that, so I'm lying there probably half drooling.

Had my arms laid out on the side pieces off the table, and I'm talking to, you know me, I'm a talker. Talking to staff anesthesiologist. I mentioned the plastic surgeon's name, who actually, he did an operation on Connor's forehead when he was little, little.

So I said, so is Dr. Olson coming at some point? And one of the nurses said, speak his name, and he appears. So he had just come in, and so we were talking a little bit.

And he said, so, you know, just chatting. And he said, so what do you do for work? And I said, I'm a pastor. And he said, Kate. And I said, I write all the time.

[11 : 39] And he said, dominant hand. And I said, you're looking at it. And he said, okay. So he locked eyes with me just before I went under, and he said, we can fix this.

So he said, I'm not going to lie to you, though. He said, this is going to be a long, hard, frustrating road. So he said, be patient, and don't be too hard on yourself.

And he said, don't be afraid to ask for help. Which, if you know me, is my worst quality, asking for help or relying on other people. So that is, without question, what God is working on in me.

Follow-up appointment with the surgeon this coming Wednesday, who I haven't seen since before I had the procedure. Second occupational therapy appointment on Thursday morning.

So each finger in here is individually wrapped for freshness. I'm kidding, of course. So every, folks, here's the fun part.

[12 : 40] So if you're bored during the day, just imagine me doing this. Every hour. So I'm missing a bunch right now. Every hour, every day, at least eight times, I need to take the splint off, unwrap each individually wrapped finger, do a series of exercises, re-bandage each finger, and put it back in the splint.

Every hour. Every day. All day. Building patience, I hope. Oh, one sec, Larry.

So how long do I have to wear this for? Five weeks. So when my hand is not being worked, it stays in here. It stays at that angle.

I can't straighten it. I can't use it. I can use the thumb. But that's it. Larry, you. Oh, yeah. So it's here. It's good. I always, there's a ring I always wear on this finger, so it is in a safe spot. Sorry. Sorry, Shannon. It's in a safe, sorry to anyone listening. I keep hitting the microphone. It's in a, I have a ring that I wear on this finger that's in a safe spot, but I can't wear it for now.

[13 : 54] So, but fortunately, yeah, it wasn't this hand. Oh, this one, I had taken it off before I started doing the, yeah.

Because if, yeah, because I was peeled, so I had, yeah. On the plus side, Sunday, when I was in talking to the emergency room doctor who had treated this the day before, he said, I said, so how's your day going today?

And he said, more hand stuff. And I said, oh, because there was lots the day we were there. And I said, so what happened today? And he said, well, a lady, plug your ears if you have to, a lady was playing with her kids at a public park, jumped and grabbed the mesh netting on a basketball hoop, caught her fingers in the netting, and then hung by her body weight, and the nurse used the word de-gloved her finger.

So she peeled her finger off, essentially. So the bone and everything. So he said, I said, that's a lot of damage. And he said, yeah, you have no idea. So anyway, believe it or not, I'm maintaining my sense of humor in all of this.

I sat with my physiotherapist and my occupational therapist on Thursday morning and was joking with them. And they said, oh, we're going to have fun for the next four weeks. And they said, you have a dark sense of humor just like we do.

[15:18] And I said, well, it is what it is. And that's what I said my mantra has become. It is what it is. I can't go back. I don't know how it happened or why it happened. We can only go forward.

So there you go. Other questions? Any, anybody? So voice to text is my option right now for sermon writing.

Michelle's going to help me do that. But yeah, even I'm a six-finger typist at the best of times. So being down two of those is challenging. But so if you get an email or text from me and it seems like I might be on my pain medication when I've sent it to you, it's because I'm talking and doing my best. But yeah, I'm in good spirits. It is what it is. I have pain. I have pain medication. It is what it is. So there you go.

Commitment and investment, which is where we left off. So there are steps involved as we're talking about building a fire.

[16:23] Gathering kindling and identifying that initial fuel source. You need to have an ignition source as well, right? Like a lighter or gasoline, I said, or a match.

We sing that old Christian song, It Only Takes a Spark, right? We're talking about our faith. And once you get that fire going, you can just plop a big old log on there, right?

No. You need to gradually care for a fire. You need to gradually tend it, to nurture it with larger pieces of wood, a bit at a time.

And it takes time. It takes patience as you add bigger logs and more fuel to eventually enjoy that glow, enjoy the warmth.

It takes time and steps. It takes dedication and patience, like many things in our lives. First things first.

[17:25] We need to build on a foundation and grow something into maturity. I'm delighted when I look at the very young apple tree in our backyard.

But I recognize that it will take time and patience for that little tree to grow. And first things first, that tree needs water and sunlight and care before it will mature and become established and bear fruit one day.

Growth and maturity in anything takes time. It takes patience. It takes intentional commitment.

Training for anything involves learning and growing and discipline.

And our spiritual maturity as we seek to grow, to become more spiritually healthy is no different.

Can you remember what it was like when you first met Jesus?

When you first accepted him as your Lord and Savior? For some of us, that's years. For others, that's decades, perhaps. And I'm betting that that moment for you was like a life-changing spark.

[18:47] That it ignited a joy and a hope in you that changed your life in that moment. And you may also recognize that since then, there may not have been similar moments, many similar lightning strike kind of moments in your faith journey.

where there was that instant and significant kind of change. Or maybe you have experienced that. And our spiritual growth and maturity is a lifelong journey.

It's not a one-and-done kind of thing. It's not instant gratification, not by any means. But it's one of ongoing patience and dedication as God continues to work in and through us.

Early last year, when our services were largely still online, we explored the spiritual disciplines of the Christian faith together. And that's just a few of the things we're going to touch on this morning. Because the spiritual disciplines of our faith are some of the first things, the first steps that we can take to be actively seeking to grow and becoming more like Jesus.

[20:01] to ensure that we remain spiritually healthy. And we've recognized that spiritual disciplines aren't things that only really godly or really holy people do, right?

We've recognized that it's wrong for us to set those things apart as saying, oh, that's not for me. I'm not good enough. Insert your not something enough in there.

But they're practical and biblical actions and activities that are intended to help us grow closer to God. They're about changing us and moving us closer to him.

The disciplines aren't simply a list of boxes to check off that will make us feel better or feel closer to God just because we do them. Although that may be a positive byproduct for sure.

Spiritual disciplines are the first things we can do as we seek to stoke the spiritual fire of our lives, as we seek to continue to fan the embers of our spiritual lives and keep that fire burning.

[21 : 11] You can go on our website into the sermon section and listen to those spiritual discipline messages again anytime because they're in greater detail there. But I'm just going to touch briefly on a few key points.

As we consider prayer and study and confession and worship. So I hope we can all agree that prayer is a fundamental aspect of the Christian life.

Perhaps of all the spiritual disciplines, we must prioritize prayer. And from one perspective, prayer may seem like an obvious spiritual discipline that every Christian should have totally figured out by now, right?

Have a good handle on it, be diligent about it, be regularly and deeply engaged in it, right? How is your prayer life?

Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6, verse 18, that we should pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.

[22 : 23] Paul also wrote in 1 Thessalonians, Instead of being intimidated by the idea of praying all the time in a formal way, be encouraged and liberated by the idea of prayer as your ongoing conversation with God.

That can happen at any time. How about the importance of God's Word in your life? Is study a spiritual discipline that's shaping you?

In John chapter 8, verses 32 and 33, Jesus said, If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Jesus reminds us here that in studying the Bible, we will be reminded of God's plan.

We'll be reminded of the gospel. And that truth, beyond anything else we can study, has the power to set us free.

[23 : 47] Studying Scripture isn't about preparing to pass some kind of test or appear more knowledgeable or wise than someone else. It's about exposing us to, immersing ourselves in, the study of what is healthy and helpful for us.

God's Word. God's truth. How about the discipline of confession? Friends, confessing our sins, and next week we're going to be looking at grieving over our sin.

Confessing our sins is the first step, one of the first things that we need to do in recognizing and acknowledging that we've often chosen our own way over God's.

And confession is not about guilt. It's about humility. It's about recognizing that we have acted against God's plan for our lives.

It's as simple as that. It's about turning away from our pride and turning back to God. And more than that, confession should lead automatically to repentance as well.

[25 : 08] Recognition that we repent of what we've done and that we will, as I've said many times, do differently after. Repentance means that we will strive with God's help to turn away from the sinful choices and actions in our lives.

And it's also about correcting the course of our lives, reorienting ourselves back to God and his will for us.

Confession leads to repentance, which unlocks the power of God's forgiveness in us. And God's forgiveness to us isn't somehow dependent upon us confessing our sin.

Do you think that God doesn't forgive you unless he hears you ask? We should want to confess our sin to God because we have been forgiven.

Do you see the difference there? We don't confess to be forgiven. We confess because we know we are. Because we want to return to and be in close relationship with him.

[26 : 25] We shouldn't want anything to get in the way of our relationship with God, least of all our sin. We've been able to develop a more rich understanding of the discipline of worship.

True biblical worship begins by recognizing who God is, what he has done, and then what he will do.

It's pretty awesome. So who is more worthy than God? Almost sounds like a silly pastor rhetorical question, doesn't it?

But in recognizing God's worth-ship, who could be more worthy of our worship? And just as the focus on the spiritual discipline of silence that we had was on listening to God, the focus of worship is on experiencing God, drawing near to him.

Worship starts with who God is, not with music, not with emotions, not with our feelings. Worship is about giving God the worth that he is due.

[27 : 49] The focus of our worship then becomes not really about us at all. It becomes about God himself. Worship is not about who we are and what we want.

Do you see how it's become distorted to mean that? The worship style that we like or don't like? The kind of songs we like or don't like? Very narrow view.

Worship is about who God is and what his worthiness should be to us. And what it should naturally draw out of us. So as we reflect on our lives and the many blessings God has given us, the many ways he's worked with us and protected us, and the depth of love that he has for us, how can we do anything but worship him?

Have you ever reflected on what the attitude of worship can mean for your life? A biblical perspective on worship should change the way we speak, the way we act, the way we serve, the way we love, and how we live.

It should change all of those things completely. Why? Well, because when we begin to see that everything in our lives, no matter if we see it as mundane or significant or not, when we see that all of those things come from God, and when our focus returns to him, all those even basic, everyday things can become acts of worship.

[29 : 38] In fact, when we have the proper perspective on what it means to worship God and bring glory to him, the spiritual disciplines themselves can become acts of worship.

We can worship God through serving others, can worship him in prayer when we spend time alone with him, in confessing our sins in community, or in times studying scripture, or times of silence and solitude.

My friends, putting first things first. The spiritual disciplines are practical ways we can keep that fire and passion of our relationship with Jesus growing.

And the same passion and fire for a relationship with God and a hunger for his truth that we can cultivate within ourselves, we can also share with other people.

So I want to encourage each of you that if you feel this fire of your spiritual life or your spiritual health may have dwindled, consider actively engaging with spiritual disciplines as a way to stoke that fire again.

[31 : 02] and ask God as well for opportunities to help you spread that fire to others. Amen.