

Sermon 2-3-08 by Dr. Michael J. Clingenpeel
A Spiritual Yardstick

On the 14th of November in 1971, Dr. Theodore F. Adams stood in this pulpit and he preached a sermon entitled *A Spiritual Yardstick*. He began the sermon with an image to which most of us can relate: a child backs up to a wall, stretches himself or herself to full height, the parent takes a pencil in hand and marks a line against the doorjamb precisely the height of the child's head. The child steps away, the parent takes a yardstick and measures up the doorjamb and announces how much the child has grown over the past year.

“Just as one can measure physical growth by means of a yardstick,” said Dr. Adams, “there is a spiritual yardstick by which one can measure his or her growth as a disciple of Jesus Christ.” I know that is what Dr. Adams said because on that particular Sunday I was seated in one of these pews, and I took out the bulletin and wrote down a series of questions Dr. Adams gave us on that occasion. It was a list of eight questions which, if answered truthfully, would give one a measure of one's spiritual growth over the previous year. So this morning I'm going to give you that list of eight questions. The questions were Dr. Adams' but the brief commentary about each of them is mine. Place this spiritual yardstick against your life and see how you measure up.

Question number 1: How humbly do I stand before Almighty God? Am I self-reliant, or do I recognize my own need for the touch of the divine? All of us have enjoyed across the years the cartoons of Charles Schultz and *Peanuts*. I remember one cartoon strip that was about that lovable, little beagle, Snoopy. He was basking on top of the doghouse. He was bragging to Woodstock (his bird friend) about his independence. At about that moment Charlie Brown, who was Snoopy's owner, appears carrying a bowl of dog food. He sets it down in front of Snoopy, turns and without a word goes back to the house. Snoopy with a sheepish look on his face turns to Woodstock and says, “Well maybe I'm sort of *semi*-independent.”

All of us need to understand that we are fed and watered by others and by the unseen hand of God's providence. All of us need to come to the place in our lives where we learn to affirm with Martin Luther from long ago that “We are all beggars before God.”

Question number 2: How grieved am I over my shortcomings and those of the world around me? You will recall that Jesus wept on two occasions, according to the Scriptures. The first was when Jesus received the word that his friend Lazarus had died. He grieved with Martha. The other occasion was when he stood and looked down on the city of Jerusalem, a city he knew was not living the things that would lead to their peace. Jesus, on both of those occasions, exhibited soul hurt, that is to say he wept over something that was deeply troubling to him or the world.

It was a pastor in Toronto some years ago, Leonard Griffith, who described our age as “the age of the shrug”. That is, the age in which we as people become indifferent to attitudes and behaviors that previous generations would have found unacceptable. There is a coarsening of the world in which we live. Perhaps we need to learn to mourn for our own shortcomings and those of the world around us.

Question number 3: How well is my life under the control of God? Every one of us obeys the sounds of persons’ voices – the voice of a parent, spouse, a teacher, our peers, a supervisor or the popular culture around us. All of us want to please someone else, but the voice we should most want to please is the voice of God. The Biblical word to describe that attitude is *meekness*. The word meekness carries connotations of weakness in our society. We admire strength and decisiveness, but what the word means in the Biblical sense is to be tamed or controlled.

There are two people in the Bible who are described as meek, one is Moses and the other is Jesus. Neither Moses nor Jesus were wimps. Yet they submitted their lives however to the direction of God.

Question number 4: How earnestly do I seek to know and to do what is right? There’s an ancient legend about the Buddha. A young man goes to the Buddha to ask for the secret to living a life of righteousness. Buddha leads the young man down to the river and, as they waded into the river, the Buddha grabs the young man by the shoulders and shoves his head beneath the waters. As the young man can scarcely breathe the Buddha finally releases him and the young man bursts his head up through the waters gasping and the Buddha asks, “When you thought you

were drowning, what did you desire most?” The young man replied, “Air.” The Buddha then said, “When you want a righteous life as much as you wanted air, then you will find it.”

You and I will never know what is right and be able to do until righteousness becomes the deep desire of our hearts, until we hunger for it and thirst for it.

Question number 5: How graciously and frequently do I extend a helping hand to those who have wronged me or hurt me? It is wonderful when we engage in deeds of love and compassion for other people. We often do this for our friends and our neighbors, but the real measure of our faith is the degree to which we can do deeds of love and compassion for those who are our enemies, those who have hurt us or wronged us deeply in some way.

Jesus forgave those who placed him on the cross, and Paul once said, “God commended his love toward us while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” Being able to act with compassion towards one’s enemies is the trait of the divine.

Number 6: How closely am I attuned to the spiritual values God has for me? All of us have values and principles. Most of us know spiritual values that are at the core of the spiritual life. Too often, however, there is a disconnect between our core values and our behavior. We say we value health yet we eat poorly and don’t exercise. We say we want God to be the most important thing in our lives but we don’t engage in disciplines that lead us to relationship with God. As parents we say we want our children to grow up with spiritual values but we don’t do the things we need to do, bring them to church, pray with them, read the Scriptures to them to help them inculcate these values. We all have core values, but too often we are not in tune with the progress or direction of those values.

Question number 7: How well am I learning the art of getting along with other people? I love the writings of Isaac Bashevis Singer. He once wrote a small children’s book entitled, *Why Noah Chose the Dove*. It’s an imaginative tale about life aboard the ark. In the book he describes how Noah has gone about choosing all of the finest animals, and naturally because they are the

finest animals they begin to vie with one another. Some are boasting, others are belittling, so life aboard the ark becomes very difficult.

In the story the great reconciler among all the animals of the ark was the dove. The dove had this unique ability to help the others forget all of their grudges. We need to have more doves in the world, men and women who take the sting out of relationships, remembering that it was Jesus who was the great reconciler.

Final question: how ready am I to suffer endure hardship and to suffer for Christian ideals? If I read the New Testament correctly it suggests that loyalty to Christ is the most precious of all things, even more precious than life itself. On occasion in our culture we run into moments when our faith comes in conflict with the culture and we're called upon to suffer some kind of hardship or disappointment for the sake of conscience.

Most of us don't understand the passion of martyrdom, the people who are zealots and fanatics for the faith. We're uncomfortable with the whole idea of self-denial and criticism for what we believe. But we who claim Christ as Lord cannot expect to bypass the suffering that Jesus himself experienced.

Well there you have it. Eight questions, eight very probing, very telling questions. They form that spiritual yardstick by which we might measure our progress as citizens of God's kingdom. As I told you at the onset, those questions are not original with me. Dr. Adams stood where I stand and gave you that list of questions 37 or so years ago.

But that list of questions was not original with Dr. Adams. They were given first by a Jewish rabbi speaking to his apprentices. That teacher said that anyone who followed those eight standards would find happiness.

Let me give it to you in the words of that rabbi long ago: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted; blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

for they will be filled; blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy; blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God; blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called ‘children of God’; blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” A spiritual yardstick.

May we pray: By these questions and these standards none of us measures up completely and yet, O God, what a wonderful guide they are for the way we are to live our lives. Be with us, O God, as we attempt to live out the life of Christ in a world that needs to hear and know. Amen.