

March 2017

Greetings Brethren,

Spring is fast approaching, and with it the beginning of a new year according to God's calendar. How blessed are we to have been called and given the priceless opportunity to know His Truth and the way of life we must walk in order to inherit eternal life. This world's customs and practices continue to change rapidly more and more toward those things inspired by Satan. Grief, strife, confusion, social chaos and the degradation of traditional values have become the normal state of affairs. What a blessing it is not to be trapped by this present distress. Even though we live in troubling times, we are to experience peace and happiness while we look forward to the glorious Kingdom to come.

God has called you to become a true Christian. Because of that you are to live a life that is totally opposite to the ways of this world. You cannot properly respond to God's call and at the same time desire to be part of this world, its customs or its mental orientation. You cannot fully love God and love the world at the same time.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon (Matthew 6:24).

Satan's wicked deception is to foster the concept that the two can coexist, and he will try to masquerade those evil things as good. Through subtlety he will try to influence you to believe that you are in good standing with God and that those natural thoughts that come to your mind are godly.

And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works (2 Corinthians 11:14).

Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! (Isaiah 5:20)

Our Natural Minds

We are born with a mind that naturally rejects the ways of God. Therefore, our task is to continue the process of putting on, or increasing in, the mind of Jesus Christ and reducing our carnality. What is that carnality? We find that description in Galatians 5:19–21:

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

These are the thoughts and actions that we repented of at our baptism. These are also the natural attributes and tendencies that we must constantly guard against and be diligent to recognize in our lives throughout the coming year. But how can we effectively reduce our carnality if we do not first honestly admit it? That is why we are commanded to examine ourselves.

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? (2 Corinthians 13:5)

Overview of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread

Before we explore the requirement to examine ourselves, it will be helpful to review why we are observing Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. A review of this may help in setting the stage for meaningful evaluation of the self. Why? What aspect of human nature tends to seep in undetected when we repeat certain actions or events without thinking? Reduced focus or attention. By doing something frequently, out of routine or physical habit, we remain aware of it but often do not keep its significance as a primary thought—just like background noise. Our brains will eventually tune out the sound as we focus on the task in front of us. The noise behind us is still important, but we reduce our focus on it to concentrate on the matter at hand. This is simply how the human mind prioritizes and focuses. With respect to Passover, that trait can cause us to shift focus and perspective on the significance of Passover as we concentrate on other essential tasks.

We go through the evaluation process every year with an understanding of the basics. On the 14th of Nisan ancient Israel stayed in their homes as the death angel passed over, saving them from certain death. In A.D. 31, Jesus observed the Passover which signified His

approaching suffering and death. His death and resurrection was the first in God's great plan for eventually bringing those that overcome and qualify into His divine Family. Through His shed blood and death our past sins have been removed. We were under the death penalty for those sins, but through repentance and baptism that guilt has been washed away.

Passover does indeed signify our acceptance of all of God's Word and our commitment to Him. By partaking of the emblems of wine and unleavened bread we are confirming the vow we made with God. Do you remember the excitement and enthusiasm you had when you initially made that commitment? Do you feel the same way at each Passover, or has it become routine? How much do you reflect on the gravity of what Jesus actually went through, and why He did it? Are you so busy removing leavening from your house the week prior that you just briefly think about His crucifixion right before the Passover service? If you are not deeply thinking about the significance of Christ's sacrifice and what it means to you in the days leading up to the Passover, you could be diminishing an essential aspect of the examination requirement.

On the night of the 15th, Israel left Egypt and escaped the physical bondage they had been under. Once slaves, they were now set free. In comparable fashion, the Feast of Unleavened Bread illustrates the ability we have to escape the bondage we are under through our carnal minds. That carnality held us captive, as slaves, in the Egypt of our minds, and we must be diligent in recognizing and removing that carnality.

We remember that Christ suffered for us. We even recall that Jesus was brutally beaten and killed. The degree of that physical suffering, however, may be far beyond what many typically assume. It was not a mere beating, or even a severe beating. The Romans perfected crucifixion as a punishment designed to maximize pain and suffering. The goal was not simply to kill, but to kill in an extremely horrible, agonizing way. Being in perfect physical shape allowed Jesus to withstand a punishment that none of us could have endured.

But how fast do we move past that fact and start thinking about evaluating the self? And how should I view all of this in relation to beginning my evaluation process?

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

Before you were called and had repented, how much sin was in your life? How many of your actions were deemed abominations by God? Did you celebrate any of the world's holidays? Did you ever lie? Had you ever hated someone or caused arguments between people? How do you think God views those things, as well as a multitude of others?

These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him:

A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren (Proverbs 6:16–19).

So if Jesus suffered that agonizing death for us while we, though ignorant, were sinning, how should we view ourselves and our treatment of others—not just those around us, but brothers and sisters in the Faith trying to fulfill God's commands? If they are fighting and battling against their carnal natures just like you are, what kind of love have you demonstrated toward them when *they* have exhibited carnal nature? If Jesus was subjected to an incredible beating and suffered tremendously for you, should you not suffer for your brethren too? Should you not be willing to suffer as you strive to remove your carnal nature and work on overcoming? Annually we recall the fact that Jesus died for us and we are grateful for it. Therefore, the more you reflect on the degree of suffering He went through for you and connect it to why He did that for you, the more perspective you will have in truly seeing yourself, your actions and your thoughts as you begin to examine yourself.

Examining Yourself

With this in mind, what have you done to fulfill the requirement of examining yourself in prior years? How exactly did you examine yourself, and for what purpose? A foundational step toward examining if you are in the Faith entails a review of whether or not you are compliant in things such as:

1. Am I observing the Sabbath and Holy Days?
2. Am I observing proper dietary laws?
3. Am I taking time for personal Bible study?
4. Am I rejecting worldly holidays and celebrations?
5. Am I avoiding man's medical system?
6. Do I believe in and accept God's plan of salvation and my conversion process?

These are all things that are part of the Faith. And, if you are faithful in these things, you are in fact living an element of that Faith. But by doing these things only, does that mean we are truly in the Faith and Jesus Christ is in us? Or, is there a much deeper meaning and requirement for us? What does it really mean to be in the Faith? The Philippians were given the answer.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5).

We are to have the mind of Jesus Christ in us. The more His mind is in us, the more

we will think and act as Jesus did. In 1 Peter 2:21, we are told Jesus left us the example and that we should follow His steps. That means we are to speak like Him, act like Him and think like Him. The problem is that by nature we do none of those things.

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19–21).

Why is it easy for us to read the statement above and not fully reflect on the self? Are you committing adultery, idolatry or murder? In the basic physical sense, probably not. So what do we frequently do? We move to other, readily identifiable traits that we know we can work on in our personal evaluation and skip over the hidden, hard-to-see things. Before you pass over these specific traits, recall certain interactions you have had over the last year with people, those converted as well as unconverted. Did you think and respond the way Jesus would have thought and responded? Did you manifest control over your mind, emotions and speech? Or, were you reactionary? Do the unconverted see you talking and behaving differently than they do? If they do not see much difference, then that provides you with a wonderful opportunity to review how you are manifesting the works of the flesh, and then to work on changing.

Were you enticed by a worldly custom or practice that is not part of God's Truth (spiritual adultery)? Did you challenge, by action or thought, God-ordained authority (sedition)? Are you focused too much on the physical things of this world (idolatry)? Did you create needless arguments (strife)? Do you desire something someone else possesses, or simply more than what God has given you (envyings)? Did you manifest real, godly love in your dealings with people? Or, are you harboring negative feelings, or no feelings at all, toward a brother or sister in the faith (murder)?

We are commanded to examine ourselves and diligently search our actions and thoughts to see where the works of the flesh have been manifested in our lives. In examining yourself, have you ever taken the works of the flesh described in Galatians one by one to see how you may have physically exhibited each trait or characteristic? Have you then taken those same traits and characteristics, one by one, and thought about how you may have exhibited them emotionally or spiritually? Careful time and consideration must be spent on these items as a prerequisite to partaking of the Passover. To not do so properly could put you in a state of partaking of the Passover unworthily.

Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged (1 Corinthians 11:27–31).

The Apostle Paul was a faithful servant. If he continually battled his carnal mind, does it not make sense that we will too? It is a battle we will face as long as we are alive, and why we must faithfully examine ourselves to assess how well we are doing.

For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin (Romans 7:14–25).

The Other Half of the Evaluation

The Feast of Unleavened Bread represents putting sin out of our lives. We are commanded to remove sin from our lives, defined as the works of the flesh in the book of Galatians. Therefore, it is imperative that you accurately identify those elements in your self-examination and work on removing them from your actions and thoughts.

But, you have only partially completed the task of self-evaluation if that is all you have done! Continue reading the command for self-evaluation:

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? (2 Corinthians 13:5)

The crucial concept to understand is "Jesus Christ is in you." You have been called, baptized and given a down payment of the Holy Spirit. You are working on overcoming by removing the works of the flesh from your life. Is that therefore the complete meaning of "Jesus Christ is in you"? Jesus is our example. We are to emulate Him and speak like Him, act like Him and think like Him. He was the Word made flesh and had a full measure of the Holy Spirit.

What traits and characteristics did He manifest? The fruits of the Holy Spirit!

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law (Galatians 5:22–23).

Think about how significant that statement is. If Jesus Christ is not in you, then you may be a reprobate, or rejected! In other words, you are commanded to live a life filled with love, joy, peace and ALL the attributes of the Holy Spirit. Simply reducing our carnal traits in the effort to overcome is not enough. Just as the Apostle Paul wrestled with his mind, we will too. We will encounter trials and difficulties, and suffer in some capacity. During these times, though we will not be perfectly exhibiting the traits of the Holy Spirit, we should be growing in them as we grow in the Faith.

As we remove the natural traits of our minds, a void is created. That void needs to be filled with the mind of Christ. It cannot be filled with neutrality.

Examples of the Fruits of the Holy Spirit

Joy: Have you thought about joy in this context? God commands you to have joy in your life. You have to have it. Joy is an emotional response and not one that automatically happens once you are called. With joy there is an enthusiasm and purpose in life. God wants us all to have an abundant life, and joy is an essential part of that.

Our minds by nature are negative, and filled with frustration, doubt and fear. As you work hard to remove the carnal traits of mind, do you remain in a neutral state? Do you mope around? Do you lack zeal and enthusiasm? Do you complain about things a lot? None of these things are fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Love: We are commanded by God to have the same attitude toward each other that Christ had toward us—one of self-sacrifice and outgoing love. Are we growing in the manifestation of true love?

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another (John 13:34–35).

Peace: Although we will live a life filled with trials, difficulties and suffering, we are commanded to have peace. Peace is based on, and achieved by, internal factors, not external conditions.

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid (John 14:27).

The time of Jesus' betrayal and suffering was at hand. He knew exactly what He was shortly to face and endure. Yet, with that knowledge in mind, He still had peace. If Jesus gave us His peace, then we must be exhibiting a degree of that peace even while we are undergoing trials and sufferings. When you are in the midst of those things, are you exhibiting a degree of peace, with a settled and controlled mind? If you do, then God is with you.

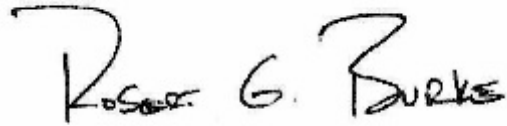
Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you (2 Corinthians 13:11).

As you prepare to examine yourself, one element of the evaluation will be to root out carnal traits. We must think about our interactions with people, our thoughts, and identify what elements of those interactions and thoughts can be classified as works of the flesh.

We must also think about what we are like. In our daily lives, what are we really like? Are you manifesting the fruits of the Holy Spirit in your interactions with people, as well as your thoughts when alone? Do you consistently exude love, joy and peace? Are you patient and forgiving? The more your daily life reflects, outwardly and inwardly, the fruits of the Holy Spirit (love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance), the more the mind of Jesus Christ is in you. In order to hear the words "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21), we need not only to remove our carnal traits, but to live and exhibit the mind of Jesus Christ in our daily lives—or the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Brethren, we have been given the wonderful opportunity to be part of God's glorious Kingdom. We must remain focused on the importance of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread and continue the work we have been given. May this be a rewarding and uplifting spring Feast season.

With much love and respect,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert G. Burke". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'R' and 'B'.

Robert G. Burke