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Examine Me Now

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I first started attending Lincoln Berean about 26 years ago, and it was really exciting to see the many different things that transpired. I recall that Pastor Lehman would end each year or begin the first Sunday of every new year with a challenge. He would look at us in the congregation and he would say, “Now make sure that you pick out one verse of the Bible a year and pray it through every day. Use it as a time of evaluation and as a time of planning – but make sure you have at least one verse.” So, for the next several years I took that to heart and did that. Over the course of time, a consistency began to develop. About eight verses kept coming to the forefront for me, and I realized that each verse could be more than just a year’s verse. Each could be a life verse. So I chose those eight verses and used them as a measuring stick to pass my life through and evaluate: “How am I doing? What’s happening in my life? Am I being the most effective for God that I possibly can be ... as a man, as a husband, as a father, as a servant?” That was a very significant challenge for me. As I closed each year, I would pass my life through those eight verses and evaluate how I was doing.

You parents have done something similar to that when you’ve had children at home – you remember having a measuring stick. When our kids were very young, I remember the first marks we would put on the wall as we measured them. We would put a check, and as they grew every quarter we’d re-measure and see how they were growing, and they were very excited. Soon they measured higher and higher up the wall, as we watched how they grew physically.

What measuring stick are you using to evaluate your effectiveness in your spiritual walk – in your personal walk with God? What standard of measure are you using? Are you measuring your life – or are you just living your life in an apathetical, nonchalant, “go as you want to go, flowing down the stream of life” way?

I asked some of the men I meet with throughout the week: “What are some of the most common ways people measure or evaluate their lives?” I want to share some of the answers with you. One of them said, “Well, how much money do I have in the bank? That’s how I evaluate if I’m effective – if I’ve had a good year financially.” One of the men (*I hope tongue-in-cheek*) said this: “If my wife’s happy, I’m really happy – it’s been a good year.” Another one said, “The kids seem to be getting along pretty well, so we must be doing something right.” Another one said, “People respect me and my place of authority in the business that I operate.” Another said, “You know, I’m in church most Sundays, and I’m doing a little better than my neighbor down the street, so I must be doing something right.” Another group of young people gave these answers: “Well, I feel good about my first semester grades” and “I had a good year in athletics ... {or speech, music, drama, art} ...” – that’s how they evaluated. “People seem to like me,” another person said, “and I enjoy that people think something special about me.” Another one said, “My political candidate won, and so things are going to be better.” And I smiled and said, “No.”

How do these things lead to more joy, more effectiveness, more completeness, or more maturity in our life? If you and I have been around any length of time we know that they don’t. How do you measure your effectiveness? I’ve asked myself, “Why don’t we take time to evaluate the way that we should – to evaluate how we can become the kind of person God wants us to become?”

I believe there are two reasons why we don't take time to evaluate. There are probably more than two, but let me just mention the two that really speak to me as I work with people. First, I think the reason is *busyness*. The reason we don't evaluate and are not really concerned about how we are doing spiritually is because we are too busy doing *our* things. Busyness is *not* next to godliness, but we have allowed that busyness to control us. We are going this way a thousand miles an hour, and that way a thousand miles an hour, and we don't take the time to sit back and ask ourselves some very penetrating questions such as: How is my heart doing? What's happening on the inside? Am I really growing a love for God and a love for people?

I believe the second reason we don't take time to evaluate is because of *self-focus* – thinking “I'm OK.” We think that the world revolves around how we feel. If I feel I'm OK, then I'm not going to take the time to evaluate. As long as everyone is doing what I expect them to do, how I expect them to do it, and when I expect them to do it – things are OK. This should not be the case. Each one of us needs to take time to evaluate, on a daily basis and during an extended time in the year, and ask ourselves, “How are we doing? Are we really effective for the glory of God?”

The psalmist says, “As I wake up in the morning I rejoice in God's lovingkindness. And as I close the day I remember His faithfulness throughout the day.” As you take a look at your life, are you remembering who God is and what He has done for you each and every day? I don't evaluate to earn something from God. I can't do that. Jesus paid it all; all to Him I owe. But I do evaluate to know Him better every day and to become more effective for His glory.

In 2 Corinthians 5 there are five reasons why we should take time to evaluate. You can pick out four, but I want to give you the major one. 2 Cor. 5:14 tells me that the love of Christ compels me on and the love of Christ controls me. The love of Christ is what stimulates me. It's that reason why I want to spend time and ask myself the tough questions: How am I doing? What's going on in my heart? What needs to be changed? What needs to be replaced? If I'm too busy, how can I cancel this? What can I do here to be more effective?

Why do I evaluate myself? It's because of the love of Christ – that love we have celebrated these last weeks, beginning with the first Sunday of Advent. It's that love which caused Christ to leave His throne in heaven and become a baby in a manger and live a life that was mocked and ridiculed and beaten and scorned and crucified. It's that love that sent Him to the cross. It's that love of Christ that rose from the dead and today sits at the right hand of God victoriously, making intercession for you and for me. It's that love that compels me to sit back and remember and evaluate how I am doing. Am I bringing the greatest glory to Christ that I possibly can? One person said that “to glorify God” means to enhance His reputation or to make God look good. Is my life doing that? The love of Christ is what causes me to want to evaluate.

1 Corinthians 4 says, “But the one who examines me is the Lord.” So what I'd like you to do is to put a mirror in front of yourself. Don't nudge your friends or your wife or your husband or your children, but put a mirror in front of yourself and ask God, “How am I doing?”

Psalm 139 says, “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts. And see if there be any wicked, sinful way in my life.” So don't evaluate

me – let God do that. I’m not going to evaluate you. But let’s allow the Scriptures to evaluate us and the Spirit of God to speak to our heart. How are we doing? Are we effective as a believer for Jesus Christ?

The measuring stick that I have chosen to look at, as we begin a new year and close out an old year, is found in the Gospel of Mark. It’s a very familiar portion of Scripture—you’ve read it many times – and I’d like to draw some application from it.

Mark 12:28-32:

And one of the Scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, “What commandment is the foremost of all?” Jesus answered, “The foremost is, ‘HEAR, O ISRAEL, THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH. The second is this, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

I’m not going to exposit the passage, but I want us to use these two commands as our measuring stick for evaluation and ask, “How are we doing?” The first command teaches us that we are to love God with our total being ... our talents, abilities, and gifts ... our intellects, emotions, and will ... our body, soul, and our spirit. We are to love Him with our total being. In other words, is our life set aside for Christ and Christ alone – and nothing or no one else? I am here to glorify and to exalt the King of glory.

True love involves the will, as well as the heart. Those of you who have been married any length of time know that very well. Love involves the will – that active choice I make. It’s not a feeling; it’s not an emotion. It is a choice that I make to love God regardless of what others say, what others think and what others are doing. For example, those of you in college have to make an active choice. When a professor stands in front of you and renounces Christianity, you have to make an active choice about who you are going to follow. If I truly love God by an act of my will, I am making a choice when I say, “God, I love you.” I am here to love God consistently, because He is worthy of it.

It’s also a heart decision. John 14:21 says it is about obedience: “He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father.” He’s saying that an act of love starts with obedience. I *choose* to love God.

A couple of days ago our family drove to Wahoo to watch my nephew play basketball, and on the way there we listened to a tape by Dr. Tony Evans. He made some interesting statements on worship. To paraphrase what he says: *“You say as a church that you love me. But for Christians the divorce rate is no different from the non-Christian world. Do you really love me? You say as a church that you love me. Yet, immorality and impurity and sensuality and internet pornography and all that garbage continues to be steeped in our hearts and so we allow it in. You say that you love Me? You say that you love Me, but you show up late for church. You say that you love Me, but you don't come in and worship Me in song – you don't worship Me with your whole heart. You say that you love Me, but you have an apathetical approach about how you're living your life.”* We’re not serving. We’re not giving.

I’m so grateful that many years ago we were challenged that an act of love is to give our lives. Pastor Lehman would teach us to give our lives for His service. We don’t serve in the church and in our community today a risen Savior because they need help in the nursery

department or children's department or youth department or college department. We don't serve because of those reasons. We serve out of love and honor for Him. We serve because of who He is and what He has done. We are to say, "Thank you, God, what more should I do for You than to give You my total life?" Those who can do that are serving with a heart filled with love.

We also give out of love. I was a brand-new Christian in October, 1973 (just "two weeks old") when the pastor showed up at our doorstep. Pastor VanCampen came to our home and we had a great time together. Today, I'm so grateful that when Pastor VanCampen began discipling me (a young football coach) that he first taught me one of the most important concepts in Scripture – and that is how to give financially. I'll never forget it as long as I live. He sat in our living room and he looked at my wife, Farrol, and me and said, "Never forget. Your heart for God is attached to how you feel about your finances." He went on to teach us about the biblical principle of giving. You don't give because you have to or because there's a need in the church. You give out of love for God. "God, I love you and I want to honor You with my finances." He taught us that we start with a tithe – that 10%. And he taught us the principle from Proverbs 3 – that we give from our "first fruits." He went on and taught us that after you learn to give, you give as God has blessed you (2 Cor. 8 & 9) – much more than 10%. What a great principle and truth! Why do you do that? Out of love for God!

How do you fall deeper in love with God? I believe you fall deeper in love with someone by choosing to spend time with them. I love my wife, Farrol, and I love spending time with her. Some 32 years ago I married my best friend. Once a month I have to travel outside of Lincoln to the different Berean churches, and when she's not able to go with me, I don't like being alone. I really don't like being without Farrol, because I have gotten to know her and she has gotten to know me. We love spending time together.

Do you love God and do you spend time with Him? I'd like to mention four ways that I believe will deepen our love for God. They are nothing unique – they're all very simple. But I believe that if you give these an importance in your life, in the days ahead you will see the difference it makes in your life.

First, is *worship* – both private and public. It is recognizing who God is and what He has done for our lives: God's *worship*. As Dr. Dave Wyrzten says, "Worship is celebrating intimacy with God." That first happens alone in our home. And then it's learning to come together in corporate worship like this, not focusing on the people to your right or left, but focusing on who God is and what He has done. The worship team led us in some wonderful worship songs this morning. Did I listen and allow Christ to stimulate and help me to grow in love for Him? That begins first with private worship. Dr. Warren Wiersbe, in his book, *Real Worship*, says that worship is giving to God all that we have and are – for all that He is, says and does. For all that we have and are! For all that He is, says and does!

Are you growing in your worship? Many years ago someone challenged us to read a book a month on worship. That was really profitable for me. Let me encourage you to grow in worship in 2001. Pick out a book on worship and read it. Fall deeper in love with God because of who He is. If you don't know what book to start with, let me give you the name of one that I just took a group of men through. It's entitled *Real Worship, Part 2* by Warren Wiersbe and it's a powerful book for our lives. Everything that we do, say and think flows forth from who or what we are worshipping. If I'm worshipping the flesh, then that is what's

going to be leading my life. If I'm worshipping the King of glory, then my life will be lived in accordance to that. Am I growing in worship?

The second way I believe we grow in love for God is to become a man or woman who is in the Word and the Word is in us. There's a difference. I so appreciate the Navigators and Dawson Trotman, who many years ago gave us the hand illustration. He said that, in order to have a grasp on the Word, every believer needs to do five things, represented by the five fingers on our hand.

First, we are to *hear the Word*. For years my son has challenged me with how many sermons on tape he listens to throughout the week. Hearing the Word. Are you consistently listening? Did you come distracted this morning? When you come on Sunday, do you sit and listen or do you have other things on your mind?

The second thing we need to do is *read the Word*. Do you have a daily discipline of opening up the Word of God on a daily basis and asking Him to speak to your heart? If you don't, let me encourage you to start one. There are many methods for daily Bible reading, but let me just mention the one that has helped me the most. Every day I read a little from Proverbs and a little from Psalms. Psalms teaches you about God, and Proverbs teaches you about wise living – how to live in the world today. So I read about half of a Proverb a day and about 35 verses in the Psalms. And then to get the whole counsel of God, I read some of the Old Testament and some of the New Testament. Long before I was a pastor, I was challenged to do that. It doesn't have to be a lot – you choose how much. But, as you're reading, ask the same two questions that the apostle Paul asked on the road to Damascus. When the apostle Paul was knocked off his horse he looked up into the heavens and said two things: "Who art Thou, God?" When you are reading, ask that question: "Who are you, God?" God delights in revealing Himself through the Word. Secondly, ask: "What would you have me to do?"

I appreciate the ministry of *Back to the Bible* so much and how it's affected our ministry here at Lincoln Berean. I shared with one of my friends who works there about what we were going to be speaking on this morning, and he offered to give us a book at a great discount. It's a brand new book entitled *Faith Walk*, which is a daily devotional from Genesis to Revelation, including thoughts from Dr. Kroll and Dr. Beckett for us to "chew on" daily. They've made it available to us as a church for half price (\$6) so you can pick one up. Let me encourage you to start the new year out by being a man and a woman who is in the Word and the Word is in you.

Dads, are you leading your family spiritually? It scares me to death as I look at the number of fathers who are neglecting their spiritual responsibility to lead their families in being a man in the Word of God. You set the model. Secondly, you lead your families. Not only do I need to hear and read the Word, but I need to study it and I need to memorize it. I meet with a close friend at the start of each week, and his goal, as a very successful business person, is to memorize one verse a week. That's not too much, nor is it too little. His goal is to memorize just one verse a week to hide God's Word in his heart and then meditate on it. To think, "How does this verse help me? How does what I'm learning in the Scriptures today help me to grow in love for God and what God's called me to be and do?"

I believe the third way that God gives us to grow in love for Him is through *active outreach*. There's nothing more thrilling than to see God change lives upon lives through the

message of the Gospel. I could tell you many stories of people I know intimately who have been on drugs, or steeped in alcoholism, but somebody loved them enough to share the Gospel with them. Today they're not only free, but they are leading in ministry here at Lincoln Berean. They are people who had addictions of some sort, but who have been freed because someone showed them the love and truth of Christ, which sets them free. God changes people, one heart at a time. There's nothing more thrilling than to be involved with that and sharing the hope of the Gospel with people.

A couple weeks ago I had the privilege of sitting with a young lady who goes to Princeton. She told me about what's going on at her campus – what God is doing there and the souls that are being saved. She shared about the drastic life changes of many students who came to college for a totally different reason, but God grabbed their hearts. What an exciting thing! What is it that causes you to fall deeper in love with God? It's God who changes lives, not you or me. Let God be God and let you and I do our job of taking the hope of the Gospel to a lost and dying world.

I'm so pleased with the message and direction that Pastor Lehman started in this church and Pastor Clark continues. We're not just here for the people who attend – but we're here to impact the city of Lincoln. We're here for Lancaster County, for the state of Nebraska, for the United States and for the world, to see churches planted, souls saved, and people built up in him. Friends, are you involved in that? If you want to grow in your love for God, become actively and intimately involved in that, and you will see God work.

Lastly, I believe we grow deeper in love with God through *prayer*. How does that help us? As you and I bow each day, we understand that God doesn't sleep or slumber. There's not a time during the day or night that we can't come before our heavenly Daddy and cry for help. I had a great example of that recently. We got a phone call a couple weeks ago about a very close friend of ours who came to know the Lord through the message here at Lincoln Berean. He's a 38 year-old man, now living in Olathe, Kansas, who has cancer throughout his body and is not expected to live. My son and I, along with Mark Geist, drove down to see him. We had a great time in visiting, but we had a greater time in prayer together with our friends, the Trujillos. That buoyed my love for God, because I know my heavenly Daddy cares so much more about that dear family than I ever could. It encourages me that God has never and will never make a mistake, no matter what happens. That comforts me. How's your prayer life? Are you growing in depth of your prayer life with God – both private and public?

A couple weeks ago I had a great thrill here at Lincoln Berean, as I met early in the morning with a group of college students. About 15-20 young men and women meet in the lower level of the D-wing on Sunday mornings to pray. They pray for the needs of people who attend Lincoln Berean and for others, and they do that because their love for God is growing. We are powerless in this world because we are prayerless. How are you growing in your prayer life? The more you grow in your prayer life, the more your love for God is going to grow. You will see that happen.

The second commandment is: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." You and I can't love God and not love those people God puts us around. We cannot say we love God and not love those "unlovelies" – like the critical boss, or the sarcastic neighbor, or the negative co-worker, or the racist person that we walk alongside. Are we treating them the way Christ has treated us? As you and I walk every day, let Jesus be our standard. We are to

not look at what other people think, say or do, but to let Jesus Christ be our standard. How did Christ treat people, and are we treating them the same way? If we are people who love as Christ loved, we are concerned *not* with controlling people or fixing people or changing them to become the way we want them to be. But instead we're concerned with helping them to become complete in Christ – fulfilled, mature, built-up, strengthened, encouraged. That's our job and our responsibility. 1 John 3:10-11 says: "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). Lots of people talk about love, but unfortunately, we are becoming the loneliest society in the history of the nation. We're not reaching out and loving others the way Christ has loved us.

I was thrilled when I heard about a Growth Group in our church that surrounded a family going through a very difficult time and provided for their needs. They were there for the family in prayer and support and encouragement. That's the way community needs to be. We are to be there for one another – "You can count on me." When my friend Louis Trujillo found out that he was seriously ill another young man, Darrell, who grew up in Lincoln and now lives in Olathe, drove right over to the house and said, "I'll be here every day for you." Darrell is an occupational therapist, and when he gets off work every evening he and Lyn make sure that they have a meal and are there to give support. When Cynthia needs to go home, they are there with Louis in the hospital. That's loving your neighbor! Do you love as Christ loved you?

Matthew 28:19-20, the Great Commission, says to go and make disciples of all the nations. And Acts 1:8 says that we are witnesses for Him in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. That happens because of the second commandment, which flows out of the first commandment. The Great Commission is a result of the Great Commandment. I love God and thus I love people, and as a result of loving people, then my heart is for the world. I desire to see people come to know Christ, and to see the joy and the peace and happiness. Do you want your love to grow? Then you begin to get involved with loving people. Remember we must evaluate ourselves, not because we want to find greater favor with God, but because we want to be more effective in the life He has given us for His glory.

I believe what the church needs is loyal men and women who see themselves as active soldiers for the glory of God. We're not volunteers – God has already enlisted us. 1 Corinthians 16:13 says: "Be on the alert. Stand firm in the faith. Act like men. Be strong." Will we be loyal soldiers?

When our two kids were growing up in our home, as they were sitting at the dinner table, I would often take a passage of Scripture and quote it to them before they went to school or to an athletic event. That passage is Ephesians 5:15-17 which says: "Therefore, be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." Then my son would roll his eyes, because he knew what else was coming next. I'd look at them and point my finger and say, "God has given us this day. So it's time to seize the day."

It's time to grab hold of every day that God has given us and to live for His glory. It's because of His love that we are commanded to love our neighbors.