

2 John 8-9

8 Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but may receive a full reward. 9 Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

Staying Focussed

Every year in summer we hear tragic stories of people drowning whilst having fun and trying to stay cool. Some of these tragic deaths are children who get into difficulties when they drift out of the shallow water near the shore and then get caught in an undertow. We can only imagine the sorrow and anguish of the bereaved parents as they blame themselves for not taking more care.

This seems to be an apt analogy for us when it comes to our faith. Do we sometimes allow ourselves to be doctrinally or morally swept out to sea where we get capsized by a strong wave and spiritually speaking 'drown'? Moral drift is nothing new for the people of God. In Psalm 55 verse 14, the psalmist bemoans the loss of those "with whom I kept pleasant company; we walked in the house of God with the throng". These are people with whom he enjoyed fellowship but who have now turned away from God. I am sure we all know people with whom we used to share fellowship but who have drifted away from the Lord. Throughout the Old Testament the children of Israel constantly alternated between faithfulness and worshipping idols.

The American evangelist, David Wilkerson, once said, "no believer is immune to the sin of drifting from Christ". By definition drift doesn't happen suddenly, but incrementally. Perhaps we get distracted by the busyness of life or the pressures to achieve and do not notice the undercurrents taking us away from Christ. The little compromises we make in how we act and react to situations in order not to stand out from the norm. Often there is a clear pattern of spiritual disciplines neglected, cultural norms accepted and indiscretions indulged.

John's words in this short letter are not merely advice which we should consider; it is not an optional extra - but as Simon Ponsonby suggests in his book – "it comes with all the force of an anointed apostle writing sacred Scripture, and all the grace of a tender shepherd caring for his flock". The Greek used here has more than one meaning; it literally means 'see yourselves' but it can also mean 'take care, watch out, take heed of yourselves'. John is encouraging moral self-scrutiny, one way of making sure we stay focussed on Christ. This is a concept found in many ancient traditions – Socrates exhorted his students to 'Know thyself', claiming that 'an unexamined life is not worth

living'. In 2 Corinthians 13 verse 5, Paul said, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves." And the writer to the Hebrews says in chapter 2 verse 1 "Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.", warning of judgement for those who abandon God's word for sin and disobedience. This self-scrutiny is not a form of narcissistic love of self, but a challenge to be aware of the state of our soul, the nature of our basic beliefs and practices. This self-scrutiny is to discern whether we are still following the teaching of Christ and conforming to his character, staying focussed.

There are two things that we must pay close attention to if we are stay focussed and avoid doctrinal and moral drift: our creeds and our deeds. Unless we are rock solid on what we believe, we will let go in how we behave. If you have ever gone orienteering you will know how important it is to constantly take compass bearings to make sure that you are on the right path. If you drift from the path you can get really lost, miles from where you wanted to be and even heading toward a precipice. It is the same with our personal and religious behaviour, we must keep repositioning ourselves according to Christ and his word. The church that John is writing too has been infiltrated by false teachers, playing with the kindness of Christians and leading some astray, encouraging drift. We too need to ask ourselves if we have allowed culture more than Scripture to frame our thinking on theological, ethical or moral issues. Just as a car needs an annual MOT, we too need to undertake a spiritual MOT to ensure that we are still adhering to Christ's teaching and imitating his character.

In his book 'Different – Living the Holy Life', Ponsonby tells of the 'Holy Club' founded by John and Charles Wesley with fellow students at Oxford in the early eighteenth century. This club was committed to seeking God, intercession, personal holiness, almsgiving, preaching in prisons and living lives to honour God. All good and important spiritual disciplines; at the core of these spiritual disciplines was a daily personal checklist of twenty-two questions which acted as a plumb line to indicate how they were doing with God:

1. Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am?
2. Am I honest in all my acts and words, or do I exaggerate?
3. Do I confidentially pass on to another what was told to me in confidence?
4. Can I be trusted?
5. Am I a slave to dress friends, work or habits?
6. Am I self-conscious, self-pitying or self-justifying?
7. Did the Bible live in me today?

8. Do I give it time to speak to me every day?
9. Am I enjoying prayer?
10. When did I last speak to someone else about my faith?
11. Do I pray about the money I spend?
12. Do I go to bed on time and get up on time?
13. Do I disobey God in anything?
14. Do I insist upon doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?
15. Am I defeated in any part of my life?
16. Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?
17. How do I spend my spare time?
18. Am I proud?
19. Do I thank God that I am not as other people especially as the Pharisees who despised the publican?
20. Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticise, hold a resentment towards or disregard? If so, what am I doing about it?
21. Do I grumble or complain constantly?
22. Is Christ real to me?

What would our churches look like if we all assessed ourselves against such a list even weekly? This is a tall ask, I think, but if we cannot manage Wesley's checklist perhaps we could start by echoing the Psalmist's request in Psalm 139 "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts", so that God can show us our sins, we can confess them and be cleansed. In our secular society we are confronted by many opportunities to compromise our Christian belief and our way of life; we must stay focussed and stand our ground. God is watching us, wanting to reward us. What is that reward? John says in verse 9, "whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son." The reward is union with God. Rather than drifting and drowning we need to stay focussed on Christ. CS Lewis in his book 'Mere Christianity' has some very practical advice for how we might stay focussed, he says:

'That is why daily prayers and religious readings and churchgoing are necessary parts of the Christian life. We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in the mind. It must be fed. And as a matter of fact, if you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument? Do not most people simply drift away?'

We need to beware spiritual drift, continually ask "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts". In Jesus name, Amen.