

INTRODUCTION

During this series, we've learned that God created us in His own image. That doesn't mean we look like God, it means that just as God is a tri-unity, we are a tri-unity. There is only one God, but He expresses Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is only one of me, but I am a tri-unity: body, soul, and spirit. With my body, I relate to the world beneath me—the physical world. With my soul, I relate to the world around me—the social world. But the innermost part of me is my spirit, and it is with my spirit that I relate to the world above me—the spiritual realm.

God designed us as a tri-unity, and it's the same way He designed the Temple. The Temple had three parts. There was the outer court, where everyone could gather that represents the body. There was the inner court, where only the priests carried out the priestly duties that's like the soul. But there was an inner room called the Holy of Holies where the glory of God dwelt. Our spirit is the innermost part of who we are, and it's where we relate to God.

Human beings are the only ones who possess a spirit; animals have only bodies and souls. When God created the animals in Genesis the Bible says that they had a *nephesh*, the Hebrew word for soul. But only of humanity does it say that God "breathed into his nostrils the breath [spirit] of life." (Genesis 2:7)

Human beings are spiritual beings. Go to every culture on the planet and you'll find some kind of religion being practiced. It may not be a true religion, but there is something inside human beings that causes us to reach for something or someone outside our finite, physical world.

How many times have you heard someone say, "I'm a very spiritual person?" They usually follow that with a statement like, "But I'm not a religious person." Or "But I don't believe you have to go to church to worship God." I have to smile when someone says, "I'm a very spiritual being." I've often been tempted to say, "Well, duh. That's like saying, 'I'm a very breathing person.'" Or "I'm a very eating person." When God made each of us, He put in us this unique capacity to seek Him.

When God created Adam, his being was filled with the Spirit of God. But when sin entered the world, Adam and Eve lost that sweet sense of God's presence. And since that time, all of us have been seeking to find the intimacy with God that Adam and Eve enjoyed. We are born with a God-shaped vacuum in our lives.

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) described this vacuum four centuries ago: "What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and unchangeable object; in other words by God himself." (*Pensees* 10.148)

Sixteen centuries ago, Augustine wrote: "Lord, you have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you." (*Confessions* 1.1.1.) The problem is that people are trying to fill that void with everything and anything except a personal relationship with God through

Jesus Christ. It's hard to count world religions, because a new one comes along almost every day, but sociologists have catalogued over 33,000 religions. A century ago, G.K. Chesterton wrote: "When people cease to believe in God, they do not believe in nothing; they believe in anything!"

So you and I have a spirit, and God desires to fill us with His presence. We've already talked about physical fitness and soul-fitness in this series; now let's turn our attention to our text to find out God's prescription for spiritual fitness.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24. "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."

Madonna sang, "We live in a material world, and I am a material girl." Well, you could say, "We live in a spiritual universe, and we are spiritual beings." We aren't spirits, but we have a spirit. Jesus said, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24) Angels are spirits; in fact the Bible calls them "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation." (Hebrews 1:14) Demons are called "evil spirits."

In the Bible, when you see the word spirit with a capital S, it's referring to the Holy Spirit. When spirit is spelled with a small s, it refers to the human spirit. For instance, the Bible says in Romans 8:16, "The Spirit [capital S] himself testifies with our spirit [small s] that we are God's children."

We've already talked about physical fitness and soul-fitness. In this message we'll focus on spiritual fitness. In verses 16 through 22, Paul presents eight rapid-fire admonitions. These are like eight pearls of wisdom he strings together. In the original language, these eight statements are organized into four categories. These four categories give us keys to stay spiritually sharp.

1. Develop an attitude of joyful, thankful prayer. *"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."*

Probably the #1 question I'm asked is "How can I find God's Will for my life." Well, there are some simple things the Bible clearly identifies as God's will for you. Rejoicing, praying, and thanking are God's will according to this passage. What makes you think God will reveal MORE details about His will for your life until you start obeying these simple instructions?

"Be joyful always" is actually the shortest verse in the Bible. In the original Greek, there are only two words with fourteen letters. "Jesus wept," from John 11 is actually three words and 16 letters in the Greek. The world talks about happiness, but the Bible promises joy. The difference is huge. Happiness is based upon happenings. It comes from the old English word "hap" meaning "luck" or "fortune." When your hap is good, you're happy, but when your hap is bad, you're sad.

Joy, on the other hand, isn't dependent on your circumstances. It is dependent only on the character and nature of Jesus.

Next, we're directed to pray continually. It doesn't mean you have to constantly be praying an audible prayer. Instead it means you should maintain a constant connection with your Father. Prayer isn't just an act; it's an attitude of acknowledging the presence of God in your life. You can ride in a car with someone for eight hours, and you probably won't be in constant conversation with that person (especially if you're a guy), but you are constantly aware of his or her presence with you, and you can launch into a conversation at will. That's what it means to pray continually.

Can you give thanks in EVERY circumstance? Alexander Whyte was a famous Scottish pastor who always began his prayers with a word of thanksgiving to God. On one particular, cold, wet, icy day, the members of his flock wondered how he would thank God that day. He bowed his head and said, "We thank thee, Lord, that it isn't always like this."

Praying continually and giving thanks are related, because when you are walking in the spirit, you're constantly giving thanks to God. Even if you're not a football fan, you are probably aware of Tim Tebow, who has been praised and criticized for bowing to thank God on the football field. It's amazing to see the Tebow-mania going on right now. Born in the Philippines where his parents were missionaries, he first gained attention and criticism for displaying Bible verses in his eye-black. Last week he threw an 80-yard touchdown pass to beat Pittsburg in overtime. In the hour following that game there were a record-setting 9,400 Tebow-related tweets per *second*.

Tim Tebow has some healthy habits, especially when it comes to prayer. The term "Tebowing," has gone viral and was recently recognized as an official English word by the Global Language Monitor. Actually, he didn't invent it. Christians have been kneeling to pray for centuries. In Ephesians 3:14 Paul wrote, "For this reason I kneel before the Father." Bowing to pray is always a good posture, because it displays humility.

And even though Tebow's team lost to the Patriots 45-10 last night, Tim could be seen Tebowing, because he believes in giving thanks in ALL circumstances.

2. Cooperate with God's Spirit within you. "Do not put out the Spirit's fire."

The King James version says, "Don't quench the Spirit." In the Bible, fire is one of the symbols of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Holy Spirit may prompt you to do something. If you obey Him, then you don't quench the spirit, but if you refuse, it's like pouring a bucket of cold water on a candle. Have you ever sensed a prompting to call someone up and encourage them, or to send them an encouraging note or email? That's the Holy Spirit. If you just say, "Nah. Never mind," then you're quenching the Holy Spirit.

Have you ever been led by the Holy Spirit to share your faith with someone, and you ignore it? That's quenching the Holy Spirit. Have you ever been led to give a donation to a worthy cause or to a needy person, and then you forget about it? That's quenching the Holy Spirit.

3. Respect the preaching of God's Word. *"Do not treat prophecies with contempt."*

The word "prophecy" is greatly misunderstood today. Many people think of prophecy as foretelling the future, like predicting what will happen by consulting a magic ball. But in the New Testament, prophecy is NOT predicting the future; it's proclaiming God's truth. The great New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce said prophesying is "declaring the mind of God in the power of the Spirit." Before the New Testament was written, this was done orally. The Holy Spirit moved the preachers to share God's truth from the Old Testament and they interpreted it in light of the coming of Christ.

Today, we would call preaching the Word of God prophecy. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul was contrasting two spiritual gifts, speaking in tongues and prophecy. He wrote, "Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. [That's what I'm doing right now] He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church...I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others [that's prophecy; instructing Christians] than ten thousand words in a tongue." (1 Corinthians 14:3-4, 18)

Let me just translate this into East Texas-ese: "Don't stop showing up at church every Sunday to hear Bible preaching!" Sadly thousands of Christians don't respect the preaching of the Word enough to even show up. Someone asked me again this week how many members we have at Green Acres and I said, "We have about 15,000 on the rolls, but the vast majority of them never roll out of bed on Sunday." It's true that going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car. But healthy Christians make a HABIT of showing up for the preaching of God's Word.

Attending church is a good habit, and missing church can become a bad habit. The Bible says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the HABIT of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:25)

Every week, we're one week closer to the return of Jesus. Consider this question: Over the past three years, would you say you've become MORE faithful to attend church, or less faithful? Only you can answer that question.

4. Filter everything through God's Word. *"Test everything. Hold onto the good. Avoid every kind of evil."*

Christians are some of the most gullible folks around. We tend to believe and forward every email rumor that comes to our computer. And thousands of Christians have been drawn away into cults who teach a perverted twist on the Bible.

Everything you hear, even from me, needs to be filtered through the Word of God. The Bible says, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)

For instance, get ready for all the growing hype and hysteria this December about the end of the world. It's all based upon the fallacy of the Mayan calendar ending. Someone sent me a cartoon of two ancient Mayans talking. One of them is holding a round stone calendar. He says, "I only had enough room to go up to 2012." The other says, "Ha! That'll freak someone out someday."

Let me give you seven reasons why the world won't end on December 21, 2012. The main reasons are that there have been multiple false predictions of the end of the world before.

1. 1,000 A.D. —the end of the first millennium. In the days leading up to the year 1,000, people stopped working and sold their homes, they were so certain the world would end. It didn't.

2. The American Shakers predicted the world would end in 1792, because of strange heavy darkness that settled over New England a few years earlier. Scientists surmise the darkness was caused by a dense combination of forest fire smoke and fog. Shakers preached celibacy was the way to salvation; consequently you don't find many Shakers around today.

3. In 1843 William Miller preached Jesus would return. His predictions were published in every U.S. newspaper, and again, thousands quit their jobs, sold their goods and gathered on hills to wait. Again Jesus was a no-show. Millers' followers wandered off and started the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

4. Charles Russell, whose followers became known as Jehovah's Witnesses predicted Jesus would return in 1914. He claimed World War I was the Battle of Armageddon, and would lead to the end of the world.

5. March 10, 1982. Two astrophysicists, John Gribbin and Stephen Plagerman wrote a book called *The Jupiter Effect*. They observed that on this date all the planets in our solar system would be lined up on the same side of the sun, and the gravitational effects would result in catastrophic earthquakes and tsunamis. The New-agers claimed the same alignment of the planets would create a harmonic convergence, which would create world peace. Both groups were wrong.

6. May 21, 2011. Of course, who can forget last spring when Harold Camping plastered hundreds of billboards predicting Jesus would return? Wrong again, Harold.

7. Jesus. The main reason I believe the world won't end on December 21, 2012 is because JESUS said, "No one knows about that day or hour...Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come...So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." (Matthew 24:36, 42, 44)

The whole world-ending-in-2012 is just a marketing tool that started last year to promote the movie 2012. Last month in Mexico, they started a 12-month tourist campaign called, "How to profit from the impending apocalypse." Believers, don't be drawn in. Test the spirits. Filter everything through the Word of God.

CONCLUSION

When you know what God wants to do in your body, soul, and spirit, you'll have a better understanding of what salvation really is. Let's go back to Adam and Eve in Garden of Eden. God created them perfectly. Their body, souls, and spirits were in tune with Him. With his body, Adam had a perfect relationship with *creation*: the rocks, plants, and animals. There was no sickness or death. With his soul, he had a relationship with his *companion*, Eve. Can you imagine living with someone of the opposite sex and having ZERO emotional issues? That would be paradise, amen? And Adam had a perfect relationship with His *Creator*. God would visit them in the Garden in the cool of evening and walk and talk with them.

Everything was in balance. God gave them only one prohibition. He said, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17 NKJV) Of course, we know they did the one thing God told them NOT to do. But did they die that day? People scratch their heads because they read over in Genesis 5, "Altogether, Adam lived 930 years and then he died." (Genesis 5:5) So was God really telling the truth when He said, "The day you sin you will die?" Remember, that's how the devil tempted Eve. He said, "Go ahead, and eat it. You won't die."

Here's what really happened when Adam sinned. He died IMMEDIATELY in his spirit; He died PROGRESSIVELY in his soul; every day of his life he regretted his mistake. After Eden do you think Adam was ever happy again? His family was so dysfunctional that one of his sons killed the other. And he died ULTIMATELY in his body; living in that ailing body for 930 more years certainly couldn't have been pleasant, especially after once having a pain-free body.

Let's focus on what happened when Adam and Eve died spiritually. Physical death is the separation of the spirit from the body, but there's something far worse than physical death, and that's spiritual death. Spiritual death is the separation of the spirit from God. Adam and Eve experienced spiritual death. They lost their sense of innocence and intimacy with God. The life went out and the light went off. They realized for the first time they were naked. They tried to cover themselves and when God came into the garden, they hid from Him.

They found themselves suddenly cut off from the source of spiritual vitality. They still looked alive, but they were dead. This is important to understand because all of us are DEAD spiritually until Jesus comes to live in our spirit through His Holy Spirit. John 1:4 says about Jesus, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men." When Jesus comes to live in you, the light comes on and you have life. The Bible says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life." (John 3:36)

I don't want to scare you, but there really are zombies. Every day, we're surrounded by "dead men walking." You may be seated next to a zombie right now. People who don't know Christ look alive, but they are spiritually dead.

It's like the parable of a Christmas tree. How many of you used an artificial tree last month? How many of you had a live Christmas tree? Well, chances are unless your Christmas tree was

still growing in a big pot of dirt, you didn't have a live tree—you had a dead tree. It looked alive, and it was alive at one time, but when you bought it and decorated it, it had been cut off from the source of life. You probably decorated it and put lights on it, and it looked more spectacular than any live tree out in the forest, but it was still dead, and chances are, you've already thrown it away.

We're surrounded by dead people who go to great lengths to look alive. And in some respects, they may look better than some of us. They can work out, and have six-pack abs, but unless they know Jesus, they're dead. They can spend money and wear nicer clothes, and live in nicer houses, and drive in nicer cars, but unless Jesus has come into their hearts to give them life, they're dead. Just like a cut-off Christmas tree.

Are you living? I'm not talking about physical life, I'm talking about spiritual life, the Bible calls it eternal life. Salvation is when God restores to us what Adam lost: body, soul, and spirit. The Bible says, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:22) Here's what happens when Jesus saves us: We receive life immediately in our spirit; the Bible calls that "being justified." We receive life progressively in our souls; the Bible calls that "being sanctified." And even though our bodies will die and be buried, one day Jesus will return and raise up these bodies, so we receive life ultimately in our bodies and the Bible calls that "being glorified."

2012 can be the best year of your life if you understand the interrelationships between your body, soul, and spirit. God wants you to be a whole person. When your body is right, you're healthy. When your soul is right, you're happy (joyful, actually). When your spirit is right, you are holy. I've reversed the order of the verse by talking about body, soul, and spirit, but our key verse begins with the spirit and moves out to the body. That's because, God's work in your life begins within your spirit and moves outward. Once He does a real work in your life, then you will desire to be right in your soul and your body.

The key part of our passage points out that wholeness is not something we can achieve on our own. It's something only God can do. Paul wrote, "The one who calls you is faithful and HE will do it." (1 Thessalonians 5:24) Paul was talking about this when he wrote, "I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6)

Sanctification isn't a special act or process Jesus does FOR us; it is simply Jesus living His life inside us. It's an ongoing process of daily surrendering to His life in us, and we will never arrive at perfection until He finishes His work.

No matter how old I get, or how long I walk with the Lord, I keep coming back to that childhood song I learned as a young person. "He's still working on me. To make me what I oughta be. It took Him just a week to make the moon and the stars; The sun and the earth and Jupiter and Mars. How loving and patient He must be. He's still working on me."

We should all wear a sign that says, "PBWMGIFWMY." That stands for "Please Be Patient With Me. God Isn't Finished With Me Yet!"

OUTLINE

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SEVEN REASONS WHY THE WORLD WON'T END ON 12/21/12

1. 1,000 A.D. —the end of the first millennium.
2. 1792 Mysterious darkness in New England
3. 1843 William Miller's predictions
4. 1914 Charles Russell's predictions (Jehovah's Witnesses)
5. March 10, 1982 "The Jupiter Effect"
6. May 21, 2011 Harold Camping's predictions
7. Jesus "No one knows about that day or hour...Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come...So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." *Matthew 24:36, 42, 44*

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes