

Like it or not I spend quite a bit of my time in hospitals. And in hospitals today there are more machines than people. Have you noticed that? When a patient is in hospital today they always seem attached to some machine or other which is monitoring their vital signs. Things like their heart rate, blood pressure or brain activity are measured to see what shape the patient is in physically.

But in the last chapter of his letter to the Philippians we find that the Apostle Paul has hooked us up to measure our vital signs, but this time these signs are not physical but spiritual. He starts looking at the people within the Church and asks the question, has our Christian faith touched our life, in four key areas. Do we have right relationships? Do we have the right focus? The right thinking? And the right finances? The answers to these questions will determine what sort of spiritual state we are in. If any of those monitors comes up with a flat line, we know that we are in trouble. And we will have to put it right. So let's look firstly at

1. The Right Relationships (v.2-3) Here we see that there is a fight going on within the Church. A fight between two women Euodia and Syntyche. A fight between two key women, for both of these have laboured hard for the sake of the gospel up until now and Paul knows them well and has much time for them. But two women who were once partners are now divided. And Paul who is a long way away hears about this division.

We are not told what the fight is about. Nor are we told who is in the right or who is in the wrong. Paul probably knew who, by he doesn't tell us it. He just encourages the two to become reconciled, to agree. And notice he places the responsibility to become reconciled on both parties - "*I plead with you Euodia, I plead with you Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.*"

So often we as Christians stand on our high horses when we have been wronged and refuse to do anything until the other party makes the first move. The problem is that the other party is often doing exactly the same thing because they feel they are the one who has been wronged! But it is our Christian duty to ensure we have right relationships, and so even if we have been hurt, *we* need to make reconciliation, so that we can agree with one another in the Lord.

For God hates division among his followers. As the old saying says "United we stand, divided we fall." If we are divided among ourselves then all our energies will be concentrated on dealing with internal problems, and we will not be reaching out to those who don't know God. We will have lost our focus, and the work of the gospel will go backwards rather than forwards.

A young boy was once asked to break a bundle of sticks up so that they would be the right size to use in a campfire. He took the sticks, tied up with a rope and sought to crash them over his knee. Not one broke. Then he leant them against a tree and jumped onto the bundle, still nothing happened. His father notices the son's difficulties, so went over,

untied the rope and started breaking the sticks one by one. For the sticks gained their strength when they were together.

It's the same with the Church. Our strength comes when we are unified in the Lord. We will have our arguments, our disagreements, our fights. But are we going to become divided? Are we going to gossip about others? Are we going to try and go behind one another's backs and complain, or are we going to face the situation and the person and try and become reconciled with our brothers, with our sisters.

Paul says that those whose names are in the book of life should not be divided, they should seek to cultivate right relationships. So do you have anything against anyone else? Has someone in your family, or at work or a friend hurt you? Do you hold a grudge? Have you gossiped about someone recently? If you have, it's important that you do not let that division stand, whether you are in the right or wrong.

And if we are seeing disputes amongst fellow believers around us, then we must be like the loyal yokefellow that Paul describes who needs to bring the two parties together. In a way it is much easier to just let it go. In a way it is not his problem, but then if it two members of his Church family, it is his problem. If we don't seek reconciliation, problems like this don't go away. And it is important that we have right relationships, for it is a vital sign of our spiritual health.

But notice that Paul just doesn't give us the negative here, there is a positive as well. For in this context we find the famous phrase to "*Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.*" This is not some Pauline thought for the day like "Smile and the world smiles with you." Paul wants those who are divided to rejoice over what they do have, rather than be divided over what they don't have. I think that is really important. So often as Christians we are divided amongst ourselves on our differences whereas we should be uniting ourselves on what we have received. So often our first reaction is to be harsh rather than be gentle. We should be full of rejoicing rather than divisive.

2. Right Focus. But Paul then moves on, because there are other vital spiritual signs he wants to talk about. And the next is the need to have the Right Focus in life. And if I was to summarise the next few verses it would be "Don't worry be Prayerful." For anxiety and worry, are the opposite to prayer, just as different as black is from white, and chalk from cheese. Now what do I mean by this?

Well when you are anxious or worried, you are concerned about a certain situation. You don't know how you are going to cope, you don't know what the future will hold. Thus anxiety is a lack of faith in God's ability to look after you. Prayer on the other hand is a desire to give the situation over to God, to ask for his wisdom, his strength, his help. Prayer then is a trust in God's ability to help you out.

One is a doubt about the future. The other is a trust in God's future. Thus anxiety and prayer are opposites. Hence Paul says "don't worry be prayerful." But I want you to remember where Paul is when he writes these words. We have seen he is in prison,

chained to a wall and to a Roman soldier in a dank dark, disgusting Roman cell. He is lonely as many of his companions have disowned him. He is frustrated as he sees the task that God has given him to preach the gospel being put on hold, and he hears news of divisions and problems in many of the Churches he has founded.

It is in this situation that Paul says "Don't worry be prayerful." He knows what it is to be anxious. He knows what it is like to face stress, but this is the answer, take your worry and give it to God. But more than that, pray with thanksgiving. Be thankful for you have a God who is bigger than your biggest problems. We have a God who has given us these circumstances. He is in control. He knows what he is doing. So be thankful for the way he has looked after you in the past and accept his wisdom now. No matter how hard it seems.

If we aren't anxious, but we pray with thanksgiving, then Paul says that this will lead us to peace, *"the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."*

So a person who has cancer and whose cancer has been arrested, may say to God, "I am so thankful." And in that act they are praising God for his power. But a person who is dying of cancer and in pain may say "Everything is all right. The Lord doesn't make mistakes, he is in control. I still have peace in my heart."

God can give you peace, even when he doesn't seem to be answering your prayer. Even when the situation doesn't seem to change. For the peace comes through the fact that God is still working. He is still working out his plan. Even if his plan is different to ours. It is a matter of the right focus. Do we focus on our troubles? Or do we focus on God? We can't change what happens to us, but we can change our response. And the response God wants out of each of us, is that when the going gets tough, the tough get on their knees.

3. Right Thinking. So the monitors recording our vital spiritual signs have a reading for right relationships, right focus and the third one looks at whether we are thinking right. *"Finally my brothers whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is praiseworthy - think about such things."*

They used to say that you are what you eat. But nowadays there are people who say you are what you think. For we have rediscovered a biblical notion in recent times that what you put into your mind will affect how your body performs. That is why most businessmen and sportsman surround themselves with experts on positive thinking, which try to give them the edge in their careers or their chosen sport.

But the Bible was the first to recognise this fact. For what we think about, what we dwell on, what we meditate upon, affects how we live. I read a shocking statistic recently, that by the time an American youth reaches 18, they will have seen 10,000 TV commercials advertising beer. 10,000! Not counting ads seen on the buses or on the corners or on radio. Do you think that sort of advertising doesn't affect the youth of today?

But it is not just youths who are affected. We fill our minds with radio talk, TV drama, the violence on the news. We read magazines, we watch movies, and listen to music with lyrics that are less than helpful. When we do this we are being influenced by our society and their ideals and their values.

Now to avoid all such influences you would have to live in the outback. And God probably doesn't want us to do that because he wants us in the world but not of the world. But we have to be careful that we don't just fill our minds with this stuff, without that which is noble, true, right, pure or lovely.

I would like to you do some maths in your head. I want you to work out how many hours each day you would spend watching TV. Then add to that how much time you read the daily newspaper or various magazines. Add to that how much you listen to secular music. Have you got a number?

Well compare it to how much time you spend in prayer, reading the Bible, listening to Christian preaching or music, or going to Church. What comes up on top? Are the 2 numbers even close? I was surprised when I did that calculation on my own life.

We need to know what is going on in the world, but we need to be prepared to live here, and that means thinking, mediating, reflecting on God and his ways, every day so that we are ready. But Paul says that we should also look to other Christians, looking at how they live as he said "*Whatever you have learned or receive or heard from me or seen in me - put into practice.*" Just by meeting together as Christians we can be encouraged to live in the right way.

4. Right Finances. That's the third vital spiritual sign and the fourth is what we do with our money. Apparently before the army of the Franks went to war, they were all baptised at once. But many of the warriors went into the water with the right hands held high, so that they did not get them wet. Then they could say this hand has never been baptised and they could swing their battle axes just as freely as ever. Similarly it is important than when give ourselves to God that we don't keep our right hands with our wallets out of the equation.

For what we do with our money is the last vital sign. Paul talks about the Philippians being eager to help in the expansion of the gospel. Giving time and time again when there was a need, but not just among their own people, but to the apostle as he sought to tell people about Jesus in other places, states and countries. For the apostle reminded them that God rewards those who are generous, and that out of God's riches all our needs will be fulfilled.

The secret is contentment. Contentment with what you have got. Whether you are rich or poor, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. Contentment and eagerness to help are the key things to be monitored.

But both are very hard. I remember leaving university and going to my first job. My firm had a policy that every 6 months you sat down with a partner and they asked you how you were going, the work, the conditions, your wage, were the topics of the conversation. At my first 6 month review I was asked was I happy with my wage. I remember answering "Of course, 6 months ago I was on nothing, now I have more than I have ever had in my life." My boss commented that no one had ever said that to him before.

But my contentment didn't last long. And after a few years I found myself not content, even though I was earning considerably more. Isn't it sad? For when we want more and more money, we find that it is like chasing fool's gold, it doesn't make you happy.

Paul was content with what he had, because his God had never let him down. He said "*I can do everything through God who gives me strength.*" For money is not in the end important, but God is. And one of the spiritual signs we need to monitor is our contentment with our lot, and our eagerness to use our money to help spread the gospel.

So we have four spiritual vital signs - monitoring right relationships, right focus, right thinking, right finances. So as I conclude I would like us to look seriously at our spiritual health. Are we well or sick? Are we growing stronger or weaker? For Paul has sent this letter to the Philippians but in God's providence he has also sent it to you. And he wants us to use it as a bit of a spiritual check up. Relationships? Focus? Thinking? Finances? Surely there is something in those four things that we could do that would make a difference for the week to come.