

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Southampton, New York**  
*“A Mid-Summer Spiritual Check-Up”*

**Psalm 24**  
**Ephesians 1:3 - 14**

**July 12, 2015**

Well, here it is... July 12<sup>th</sup>! Founders' Day has come and gone; the Fourth of July fireworks have lit up the evening sky; good driving is back on the endangered species list; and traffic has reached a complete standstill! All of which can mean just one thing: we're fully immersed in the summer season... which will pretty much dominate our lives from now till Labor Day! Which makes this the perfect time for us to slow down a minute; take our spiritual pulse; review our religious responsibilities; and subject our summertime practice of our Christian faith to a little bit of “sanctified self-examination!”

And that's exactly what we're going to do this morning! Paul told the Ephesians that we who have *“hope in Christ... are to live for the praise of his glory.”* So, we're going to put ourselves through a handy-dandy, no frills attached, Reader's Digest condensed, *“mid-summer spiritual checkup”* to see how we're measuring up to that lofty, and all-important challenge!

And our goal is to assess how well we've been addressing some of the important disciplines of our faith so far this summer. And as we do, I hope we'll be encouraged to make, and to keep, those disciplines a high priority as we wade through the next seven weeks of vacations, ballgames, slumber parties, and back-to-school shopping junkets! So, with that in mind, let us now begin our little *“mid-summer spiritual checkup!”*

And, to get us all off on the right foot, the first area of our spiritual life that I'd like to subject to examination is the area of **worship**. And, I can tell you that we're all off to a good start on this one because, **hey... we're here!** We are in fact practicing the discipline of worship right now! And that's great, because as I mentioned in a recent sermon, we Presbyterians believe that **worship** is the single most important thing that we do as the people of God!

And that being the case, the single most important way that we can stay strong spiritually during the summer is to make sure that we keep on *“going to church!”* So, all of you here this morning can start your checkup by giving yourselves high marks for worship! Now, if this is the **only** time you plan to attend church this summer, we may have to take a slight deduction from your score... but you can earn it all back by showing up a few times as we make our way through August.

And of course, you don't have to attend church **only** here at First Presbyterian, or wherever else you happen to make your church home... you can and should join other believers for worship **wherever** the summer takes you! So, give yourself a 10 point bonus if you attend worship while vacationing out of town. And if you're visiting us this morning because you're vacationing in the Hamptons from some other part of the world... you get a whopping 20 point bonus!

Okay, the next area of our spiritual life that we want to subject to examination is the discipline of **Bible study**. If worship is the most important thing we do as Christians, studying and growing in our understanding of the Scriptures has got to be a pretty close second. The Word of God is our authority for life... and it's our guide for wise decision-making... and it's the witness, *par excellence*, to God's faithfulness to, and love for, His people. The truth is, the better we understand the Scriptures, the better we understand what God is up to in our world... and the better we understand the claim that God has made upon our hearts through His Son, Jesus Christ... and the better we understand how to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. **Therefore, we need to make it a point to do as much Bible reading as we can this summer.**

Now, I know that this is a difficult discipline for a lot of us to follow. Some parts of the Bible are a real challenge for a twenty-first century audience to understand... and sometimes we get the **false** impression that only experts, scholars, and theology gurus can know what the Bible **really** means. Well, to take nothing away from the legitimate and necessary work of biblical scholarship... the fact is that the Bible was not written **by** scholars, and it was not written primarily **for** scholars. And if we approach it with our **hearts**, as well as with our heads, there is a great deal that we can and do understand without the aid of an advanced degree in biblical studies!

And, hey, where is it written that we can't do a little scholarship of our own, when we come up against a text that we really don't understand? In other words, if you have a biblical question, ask your pastor for help! Or check out a commentary from the church library! Or discuss it with a friend or a fellow church member who knows the Bible better than you do!

If you're trying to at least keep in contact with the Bible this summer, or if you're working your way through our 375<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Bible Challenge, you pass this part of the checkup with flying colors! And if you take your Bible with you on vacation, give yourself a 15 point bonus. Make it a 50 point bonus if you actually **read** it while you're on vacation!

Next, we come to the discipline of **stewardship**. In other words, how are we doing in our practice of **giving** this summer? Are you keeping current in your commitment to the church during the summer months? Are you supporting other local or national causes that are aimed toward helping those who are less fortunate than we are? As we know, summer is a time for trips, and ballgames, and golf outings, and all kinds of other fun stuff... all of which can be a serious drain on the old pocketbook. Well, that's fine... as long as we're being sensitive to those giving opportunities which the Lord periodically sends our way, which can make all the difference to a needy individual or family in our community, or on the other side of the world.

While we certainly needn't feel as if we have to support **every** good cause, we also mustn't forget that **the practice of generosity is one of the most important ways that we grow and mature in our spiritual life**. So, as we enjoy the next month and a half of summer fun, let's make generosity a hallmark of our life together!

Of course, any assessment of our spiritual health has to include an examination of our **prayer life**. Now, we'll be praying several times in church this morning, which is

great... but what about the rest of the week? Opportunities for prayer are all around us, if our eyes are open to them.

For example, you can start, or end, the day with a few moments of prayer; you can pray weekly with a group of friends; you can gather the kids for a brief morning devotion before the day's activities begin; and don't forget about saying grace before meals! It may not seem like much, but it's a good daily reminder of our dependence on God, and God's daily providence for all our needs! In the whirlwind of activity and distraction that makes up much of our summer, taking quiet time for prayer is often one of the first casualties. We get out of our routine, and we just don't think to stop and pray.

So, if you're managing to keep your prayer life above water this summer, give yourself another "A!" And if your prayer life is sagging just about now, make its resurrection one of your top priorities for the next five weeks! It will undoubtedly have a positive impact on every other thing you do from now till September!

This brings us to the discipline of *mission work*... or, to put it another way, *ministering in the name of Christ to the suffering, the needy, and the oppressed*. The summer season offers countless opportunities for us to engage in such ministry. Paying a visit to a hospitalized loved one, calling at the nursing home, mowing the lawn of a disabled neighbor, driving a friend to a doctor's appointment, volunteering at Meals on Wings or Human Resources of the Hamptons... these are just a few of the ways in which we can reach out in love and compassion in the name of Christ!

A lot of our summer activities cause us to be very self-preoccupied and self-absorbed, which, if taken to an extreme, can certainly be detrimental to our spiritual life. Doing something for someone else is a wonderful antidote for such self-centeredness! So, if you're making some time this summer to think about anybody other than yourself, give yourself 100 points for this portion of the checkup!

Next, we want to assess how well we're doing at *proclaiming the Good News*. In other words, are we doing anything this summer to proclaim to our community, or to our neighbors, co-workers, or friends that in Jesus Christ there is hope, and peace, and meaning, and joy that can be found nowhere else? Granted, this isn't a discipline that we necessarily spend all that much time thinking about... but it's still very important, to our own spiritual health, and to the spiritual health of the people we know and spend time with!

One meaningful way to make progress in this area of discipleship is to invite a non-church-attending friend to come with you to worship some Sunday! Hey, you can even tell them that our church is air-conditioned! Or, you can offer to keep a suffering neighbor in your prayers. Or, you can point a person who's looking for answers to the problems of life, toward your pastor, or your church, or the Bible, or any other source where they might have a chance to be exposed to the message of the gospel.

You never know if doing one of these simple things might completely change someone's life for the better. There are lots of people right here in our own community who still need to hear the gospel... sooner or later, they're going to need to hear it from you and me!

One final area of our spiritual life that merits assessment in our “checkup” is what I’m calling *other theological reflection and study*. By this I mean reading, studying some theological issue, engaging in theological discussions, and generally increasing our basic knowledge about God and God’s activity in our lives and in our world.

Summer offers many ways in which we can grow in this area. Our church library is full of good books and videos that will challenge and deepen your understanding of God’s ways; various cable TV stations periodically air thought-provoking documentaries on things spiritual and religious; most newspapers have special weekly religion sections which feature articles of interest to members of the Christian community; and the list goes on and on.

Devotional reading and the reading of great literature also fall within this category, as does the simple act of discussing theological ideas with a friend. So, if you discuss a Sunday sermon over lunch, give yourself a 5 point bonus. If you say nice things about the sermon, give yourself a 100 point bonus! If *I* preached the sermon, and you still say nice things about it, *you win a new car!*

Well, many other disciplines could be included in a mid-summer spiritual checkup. But I hope this list will at least encourage us, and point us in the right direction! And no matter how you fared on the checkup, if you’re willing to pay even a little attention to these areas of your spiritual life, your summertime practice of the faith will be vital, and it will be meaningful, and it will be strong! And for Christians, that’s what it’s all about, right?

May this be our goal... and may it be our quest... this summer, and all the days of our lives! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!