

A SPIRITUAL CHECK-UP

(James 4.1-10)

Introduction

I went to my GP for a check-up last year. She took my pulse, measured my blood pressure, weighed me on the scales, assessed my diet, checked whether there were any aches and pains and sent a sample off for analysis. I'm pleased to say that everything seemed to be in good working order.

Lent is basically a six-week *spiritual* health programme. And I see our second reading this evening as a sort of spiritual check up with six areas for examination. We're going to take them one by one.

1. Inner Contentment

The first is to do with the health of the heart - our inner contentment. In v1-2 James asks, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight."

It looks like these verses are about relationships with each other. But they're not really. Just as you might complain to a doctor about stress, only to find that the real problem is high blood pressure, here, you've got a presenting problem that has an underlying cause.

The *complaint* is fights and quarrels. But there's a real issue under the surface that is causing all the friction; and it's covetous desires.

The Bible says here that my relational friction with someone basically caused by unhappiness inside me. It's the public face of my private envies.

James uses really harsh words to describe situations of human disagreement; verbs like to fight, to battle and to kill. It's the language of war.

Do you know people who like to fight? Some people just love a good slanging match don't they? They fight at home. They fight at work. They fight with relatives. They fight with neighbours. And they fight at church. If you

locked them in a room all by themselves, they'd probably fight with themselves.

But Jesus said that the world will know we are Christians *by our love*.

So how are you doing on the inner contentment test? Are you argumentative or are you a peacemaker? What about the underlying cause? Do you compare yourself with others, envying what they have?

I wish I had his money or her figure or his hair, or her voice – or whatever? Or have you learned to be content with what you have and who God has made you to be?

2. Prayerfulness

The next item on the spiritual health check is to do with prayer. How are your knee reflexes? James says in v2-3 that our walk with God goes pear shaped when (a) we don't pray and (b) when we do pray it's self-seeking.

"You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

James had several nicknames. One was James "the Just." Another was James "the Less." Paul called him James the brother of the Lord. But tradition tells us that James was nicknamed "camel knees."

Have you ever seen the knees of a camel? They're all nobly with dead skin. It's because James was a giant in prayer and his dedication caused conspicuous calluses on his knees.

Some people feel a bit uncomfortable with the tone of James' letter. It certainly is a little direct in places. But I for one am always ready to listen to someone who has spent hours on his knees before God.

The state of our prayer life has to feature prominently on any spiritual health check. God is interested in the state of your knee reflexes. So how are you doing on prayer?

3. Values

The third thing a medical examination might evaluate is weight and height to calculate Body Mass Index - which gives us clues about whether our diet is healthy. Spiritual diet, what we're taking into our system, is all about our values; what is important to us. In v4-5 James says:

"Don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."

When the focus of my life is me, it can't be Christ. God does not think his Son should take second place. It is not OK that Jesus be reduced to a peripheral hobby in my busy life.

Worldliness is any unhealthy centring of life around stuff, hard work, success, money and sport. Even home, health, spouse, children - it doesn't matter. They're all good things – until they become ultimate things.

Jesus said "You cannot serve both God and mammon." That's money. God will not budge up and share his glorious throne with anybody or anything that is less worthy than him.

Sometimes you just want the doctor to tell it to you straight don't you? Stop smoking. Start exercising. Eat more fruit and veg. Well James come right out with it. "Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" he says.

So, is there anything in your life today that is polluting your values, and challenging the absolute lordship of Christ in your life?

4. View of Self

Spiritual health check number 4 is about how we view ourselves. Believe it or not, how I evaluate myself in relation to others and to God will basically determine whether the grace of God in my life runs free or runs out.

I saw an amusing little ironic comment in a joke book recently. It said "When I die, I would like the word 'humble' to be inscribed on the plinth of my statue!"

But God actually *resists* proud people. In v6, the Scripture says: "'God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble and oppressed.' Submit yourselves, then, to God."

How do I know if I've got a problem with pride? Well, if I often get frustrated because I know all the answers, but nobody bothers to ask me the questions, it probably means I've got an issue with pride.

God is completely and totally opposed to it. The word that's used here is actually a military term. It's the word you'd use to describe a full army lined up and primed for battle.

But God gives grace to humble people, whose view of self is modest and unassuming. God likes humble souls because they correctly attribute greatness and glory and prominence and worth to the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus Christ, and deflect attention away from mere human achievement.

So how are you doing on the humility scale? How gladly are you submitting yourself to God?

5. Spiritual Resistance

The next thing a medical examination might look at is your temperature. The thermometer should read 36.6°. If it's much higher you've got a fever, probably caused by an infection.

The immune system works when antibodies resist infection. The *spiritual* immune system works when faith stands firm and resists the devil.

James says in v7-8 "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you."

So when the devil tempts you to sin - resist him. "Satan, get out of my thoughts." When he tempts you to selfishness - resist him. "Satan, get behind me." When he accuses you of falling below the reach of God's grace - resist him. "Satan, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ."

And when you do resist the devil, the promise is that he will slope off. When under spiritual attack, draw near to God. Worship him. Tell him you love him. And he will come near to you.

6. Sensitivity to sin

So on to the last examination in this spiritual check-up. Perhaps the part of the body most sensitive to pain is the teeth. Quite honestly, hands up if you love the dentist's drill...

When you think about it though, sensitive teeth are an early warning system against tooth decay. If we didn't get twinges chewing toffee we wouldn't know we needed to take preventative measures against losing our teeth.

In v8-10 James says "Wash your hands and purify your hearts. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

Just like a toothache, sensitivity to sin is unpleasant. Look at the verbs here; to grieve, to mourn, to wail. Grieving over my selfishness, mourning my prayerlessness, wailing over my apathy towards God's word *does* look gloomy. It's not pretty, *but* if it drives me to repentance, it is a route to spiritual health.

James says "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." It reminds me of when the kids were very small. I'd lift them up above my head and twizzle them around and they'd laugh and shriek with delight.

Oh, the joy of being forgiven. Even better than waking out of the dentists – all done, all over.

Ending

As we prepare to go into Lent – how's *your* spiritual health? How are you doing on these six indicators of spiritual fitness? Where would you say you need to tone up between now and Easter?

Let's pray...