

## **SPIRITUAL STOCK TAKING**

**“Now, therefore, thus saith the Lord of hosts; consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes. Thus saith the Lord of hosts; consider your ways” [Haggai 1: 5-7]**

*Rudy Giuliani was the Mayor of New York for eight years, 1993-2001. His popularity soared a few months to the end of his tenure for his leadership in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Four days before leaving office, he made a farewell address before an enthusiastic crowd of supporters in St. Paul’s Church in Lower Manhattan, the church built in 1766 that survived the collapse of the twin towers. He took stock of his administration and concluded that the city’s biggest change during his tenure has been in its spirit: “that city that used to be the rotting apple... that city is now a very strong and ... confident city.”<sup>1</sup> Can you speak as authoritatively as that about your spiritual life so far?*

*Individuals, enterprises and organizations do annual stock taking. This may take the form of a physical count of inventory, such as in a retail shop, or an audit of performance against expectation, such as accounting/financial or personnel audits. An evaluation of the impact of a project undertaken by funding/donor agencies is another example of stock taking. In the case of stock taking in a shop, the whole business is normally closed to customers. In other words, enterprises can afford to forgo income-generating activities for a few days so as to reconcile their physical inventory with their records. It is that important. But, how many of us do stock taking of our relationship with God?*

*. There were significant developments in the year 2001 to suggest that the world is approaching its end, if we believe in Biblical prophecies. Therefore, “knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed” [Rom. 13:11]. As we mark the end of an old year and usher in a new one, it is an appropriate time for us to re-examine our lives in the light of our walk with God. That is the purpose of today’s lesson.*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.cnn.com/2001/US/12/27/rec.giuliani.farewell/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/12/27/rec.giuliani.farewell/index.html)

## 1. Why is spiritual stock taking necessary?

A 15-year old boy was very angry when his mother corrected his table manners. Whatever his mother asked him to do, his answer was “I don’t want.” Then, she herself got angry and told him to do as he pleased. Again, he snapped back, “I don’t want!” In other words, his answers were not based on what his mother said but on his anger! So is human liberty that is not anchored on a spiritual foundation.

In their classical book, *The Lessons of History*, Will and Ariel Durant concluded “there is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, in our modern pursuit of liberty and human rights, we have thrown morality overboard. Those who contract same-sex marriages want to adopt other people’s children! The more freedom we have, the lonelier and less happy we become. We need sleeping pills to enjoy our soft beds! That is why the Preacher has concluded, ‘all the labour of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled’ [Eccl. 6:7].

Therefore, we need to do spiritual stock taking for the following reasons, among others:

### a) We are unhappy with our present station in life

Our backyards are littered with uncompleted tasks and unfulfilled promises. Our output does not seem to match our effort. After wasting his share of his inheritance on “riotous living,” the Prodigal Son had to take a job as a swine-feeder, and lived on the same food as the flock that he took care of. It was then that he took stock of his life, “and when he came to himself, he said, how many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee” [Lk 15:17-18].

### b) We have reached the end of the logical road

As long as we can logically justify our situation, we may not see the need to take stock. For example, as long as Saul sat on the throne as the king of Israel, he thought that he could kill David to prevent him from becoming king. With prophet Samuel dead and having used his authority to “put away those that had familiar spirits and the wizards out of the land” [i.e., mediums [1 Sam. 28:3], Saul had no choice but to come to seek God’s face, even though it was too late [vv. 5-6]. Our youths have tried drugs, alcohol, promiscuity and everything else without getting any satisfaction. It is time for them to get high on Jesus!

### c) Physical death is around the corner

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Linda Bowles, “Taking stock of our lives,” <http://www.townhall.com/thcc/content/bowles/bowl122997.html>

We are not growing younger. Some of us may be suffering from a terminal disease, and neither medical treatment nor prayers appear to be efficacious. Sooner than later, we may be called home to the Lord. That is a good trigger for stock taking.

When prophet Isaiah came to king Hezekiah who was “sick unto death,” he told him, “set thine house in order; for thou shalt die and not live.” In reaction, the king “turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord” [Is. 38: 1-2]. He had no other option at that point!

## 2. What stock should we take?

Spiritual stock taking is different from the physical type because “the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” [1 Sam. 16:7]. The *whole duty* of man is to “fear God and keep His commandments” [Eccl. 12:13]. Deut. 28 confirms that earthly blessings are attached to obedience [vv. 1-14], and curses to disobedience [vv. 15-68]. For example, the people of Israel in Haggai’s time suffered economic and personal hardships because they had neglected to build God’s house while they were living in pent houses [Hagg. 1:3-6].

This obedience takes the form of earthly responsibilities/duties that we owe God and our neighbours, which we can carry out by ourselves or with our material means. Using that framework, we can do our own spiritual stock taking, as summarized in the box below. In other words, looking at our lives so far, especially this past year, how have we fared in fearing God and keeping His commandments? Here is a checklist for guidance:

### a) Duties to God

- ❑ *Do you sincerely believe in and trust God? How many of the numerous decisions you make each day [concerning family, career, health, protection, etc.] do you first place before Him in prayer? Do you pray at all? How often?*
- ❑ *How often do you read the Bible? Do you read it with reverence or as you would Shakespeare’s plays? How much reliance do you place on the word of God?*
- ❑ *Do you go to church? How often? Do you find worship fulfilling or mechanistic?*
- ❑ *Do you pay tithes on your earnings? Do you owe on vows and pledges? Do you offer thanks for God’s favours and promises?*
- ❑ *Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour?*

- *What is now your attitude to sin? What is making it so difficult for you to give up some sins that hinder your full acceptance of pure living? Do you find it difficult to confess your sins and ask for God's forgiveness each time you fall?*
- *Etc.*

<b>Spiritual stock taking: what to look for</b>		
<b>Your Duties</b>	<b>Your Means</b>	
	WITH YOURSELF	WITH YOUR MATERIAL MEANS
<u>TO GOD</u> -Fear God -Keep His commandments [ <b>Ecl. 12:13</b> ]	<u>Through</u> -Obedience [ <b>1 Sam. 15:22-23; Matt. 12:50</b> ] -Worship & service [ <b>Matt. 4:10</b> ] -Self as a living sacrifice [ <b>Rom. 12:1</b> ] -Body as God's temple [ <b>2 Cor. 6:16</b> ]	-Pay your tithes & vows [ <b>Mal. 3:8-10</b> ] -Offer thanks [ <b>Ps. 50:14</b> ]
<u>TO MAN</u> -Family [ <b>1 Pet. 3:1-8</b> ] -Neighbour [ <b>Matt. 22:39</b> ] -Believers [ <b>1 Cor. 5:9-13</b> ] -Employers [ <b>1 Pet. 2:18-19</b> ] -State [ <b>Rom. 13:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:13-17</b> ]	<u>Through</u> -Love, fidelity & service [ <b>Rom. 13; 8-10; 1 Tim. 3:1-13</b> ] -Forgiveness [ <b>Rom. 12:19-21</b> ] -Fellowship [ <b>Acts 2:42</b> ] -Honour & obedience [ <b>Rom. 13:1-4</b> ] -Humility [ <b>Lk 18:14</b> ] -Preaching the word [ <b>Matt. 28:19; 2 Tim. 4:2</b> ]	- Make provision for their needs [ <b>Eph. 6:4</b> ] -Offer charity [ <b>Lk 6:38</b> ] -Pay due taxes [ <b>Rom. 13:6-7</b> ]

b) Duties to man

- *Do you forgive those who offend you? Do you love your enemies and pray for them? Can you forgive and forget? Do you find it hard to apologize to those you have wronged?*
- *Does your success get into your head or have you remained humble and respectful? Have you used God's given talents to serve others?*
- *Have you sacrificed your family's life, love and care to your work, career, ministry or neglect?*
- *Do you practise love and fidelity?*
- *Do you respect and obey people in authority over you? At home? In the church? In business? In government?*
- *Do you pay all taxes and rates to the appropriate authorities?*

- ❑ *Do you spend official time for private business? Do you in deed work for your pay?*
- ❑ *Can others trust you? What kind of fruits do you exhibit before unbelievers?*
- ❑ *Do you preach the gospel to others? Where? Are you ashamed of your faith? Are you afraid of persecution to declare your faith?*
- ❑ *Do you support your local church with your personal participation in its activities and with your material means?*
- ❑ *How cheerfully do you give to those genuinely in need?*
- ❑ *Etc.*

Having taken stock, how do you feel now about your relationship with your Father? If you are like me, it is very unsatisfactory! Therefore, the next thing for us to do now is to re-organize our lives to fit God’s plan for us “for I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon Me, and ye shall go and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you” [Jer. 29: 11-12].

### 3. Conclusion: setting the right priorities

The main source of our poor performance is not so much the lack of zeal or will but our mistaken sense of priorities. First, we walk by sight, not by faith, in many aspects of our lives. Even where we claim to work by faith, we walk more by presumption [what we like about what we think God has said!] than by true faith [“the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” – Heb. 11:1].

God specifically instructed the young prophet from Bethel that He had sent to king Jeroboam not to eat or drink anything offered him there [1 Kgs 13:9]. He did well to refuse the king’s gifts and food. However, an old prophet offered him food, claiming, “I am a prophet also as thou art; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the Lord, saying, bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. But he lied unto him” [v. 18]. He ate and drank, and immediately, “the word of the Lord came unto the prophet that brought him back; and he cried unto the man of God that came from Judah, saying, thus saith the Lord, forasmuch as thou hast disobeyed the mouth of the Lord, and hast not kept the commandment which the Lord thy God commanded thee, ... thy carcass shall not come unto the sepulcher of thy fathers” [vv. 20-22]. If the young prophet’s hunger had not deadened his ears, he would have known that it was an angel, not the Lord, who reportedly authorized him to eat! He obeyed what he liked about the message, not what God actually said.

Therefore, in re-organizing our priorities so as to tune into God’s channel, the following guidelines are recommended:

- ✓ *Start with activities that are **important** and **urgent***
- ✓ *Next, select those that are **urgent**, even if **not important***
- ✓ *Next, pick those activities that are **important** but **not urgent***

- ✓ Finally, *eliminate all activities in your lives that are **neither important nor urgent***

Importance and urgency here are used within the context of the extent to which such activities enable us to fear God and keep His commandments, the whole duty of man on earth [Eccl. 12:13], the basis for temporal and eternal blessings [Deut. 28: 1-14; Matt. 19: 27-29].

a) Important and urgent

Issues of **salvation** fall in here. In terms of relative importance, Jesus says that we should seek first “the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things [earthly blessings] shall be added unto you” [Matt. 6:33]. In terms of timing, it is now, not tomorrow [Prov. 27:1], for “behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” [2 Cor. 6:2]. We cannot push it to later because it may be too late. So, **confess your sins** right now and **accept Jesus into your life**.

b) Urgent but not important

With Jesus now in your life, you can ask for God’s specific guidance to pursue your **earthly chores**, such as education, career, love and marriage. Apart from being the blessings that God gives to those who obey Him, such earthly achievements will help you to perform your earthly duties to God and to man, as we had discussed earlier.

c) Important but not urgent

Again, these are activities that are associated with your duties to God and man but which you may not as yet be in a position to fulfill by means or by time. For example, a student not yet earning any income or an unemployed person does not owe any tithes. When Jesus was invited to heal Lazarus, He took four days to respond because He considered it not urgent even though healing was an important part of His earthly ministry [Jn 11:1-17]. Paul wanted to first take the good news to Asia but the Holy Spirit stopped him and led him first to Macedonia in Europe [Acts 16:6-10].

d) Not important and not urgent

The bulk of our earthly activities fall here! Paul summarizes them as follows:

*In time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience [Eph. 2:2].*

Happily, carnal conduct should be behind us by now! May it stay that way as we look forward to a more fruitful walk with God this coming year.