

Reflection - discipline five in our spiritual formation series

PART 2: REFLECTING ON LIFE



MISSIONAL COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Read this Overview Together

Can you look back on your day, be completely honest about your thoughts, actions, and words, and not be crushed by shame or guilt? Take a minute and really consider this. As we read in part 1, the practice of spiritual reflection provides a way for us to be both fully known and yet fully loved. There is a way to be completely honest about our sin and yet still hopeful for transformation.

Spiritual reflection must start with remembering God's presence with us. When we see how God was with us and would never leave us, even when our hearts were far from Him, we are given a safe place for honest reflection and self-examination that can lead to genuine repentance and transformation. This honest reflection on our own lives will stir in us gratitude for the ways we see God changing us and also sorrow for the ways we are walking away from His presence. And Spirit-led sorrow will always lead to repentance (2 Cor. 7:10), confession, and transformation. Rather than being crushed by guilt or shame, we can experience genuine sorrow as we look back and see how we spurned God's presence; yet, we can also experience joy as we receive His steadfast love and forgiveness.

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun writes, "Self-examination is a process whereby the Holy Spirit opens my heart to what is true about me. This is not the same as a neurotic shame-inducing inventory. Instead it is a way of opening myself to God within the safety of His love so I can authentically seek transformation. Confession embraces Christ's gift of forgiveness and restoration while setting us on a path to renewal and change."¹

Many of us avoid thinking honestly about how we lived today. Sometimes, it's just too ugly to be honest about. When we recall our anger, impatience, lust, pride, hatred, fear-driven action, and lack of faith, we feel disheartened by the dark side of our hearts that just never seems to change. Yet, if we aren't completely honest, we miss the invitation God has given us to confess our sins and be healed (James 5:16). We miss the opportunity to hear God's personal reminder that we are forgiven and loved. And ultimately, we miss the opportunity to be changed.

In Part 1, we saw from Psalm 139 how King David acknowledged that God was always with him and would never leave him. Now, we continue to walk through Psalm 139 and see how David's understanding of God helped him engage in honest self-examination. David was able to be honest about His own heart and engage in genuine self-examina-

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¹ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, pg. 91

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MC Discussion Continued...

tion because He rested in God's loving presence with Him, even in the darkness.

With almost shocking honesty, David writes:

Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!

O men of blood, depart from me!

They speak against you with malicious intent;
your enemies take your name in vain.

Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?

And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

I hate them with complete hatred;

I count them my enemies. (Psalm 139:19-22)

These words come as a bit of a shock when reading Psalm 139. David reflects on God's continual presence with him and how God would never leave him. He reflects on God knowing him intimately before he was ever born. He says, "How precious to me are your thoughts, Oh God." And then, seemingly out of nowhere, David launches into this raw request for God to slay the wicked, saying he hates them with complete hatred. Without debating whether or not David's words were righteous, it's clear that they are very honest. He is not holding back. Within the context of this entire Psalm, the point is clear. David knew he was safe to be honest before God. God would not leave him.

As you spend time practicing reflection, you may be afraid to be honest before God about your day. What would God think if He knew how you really felt or if He saw the dark corners of your heart (as if He didn't know it already)? But as David says, "even the darkness is not dark to you." God will not be surprised as you lay out your day before Him. He has already seen it all and He is still with you!

Resting in this, King David goes on to invite God to help him see his life more clearly:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting! (vs. 23-24)

Because we trust God's love for us, we can invite God to look at our days with us, search our hearts and reveal what David calls "any grievous way" in us. As God graciously reveals our sin and the areas of our lives that need changed, He invites us to confess our sin, be forgiven, and experience the transformation that comes through genuine repentance. And when we experience God's forgiveness, we get to also experience blessing or true joy.

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MC Discussion Continued...

As David says in another Psalm he wrote:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Psalm 32:1-2)

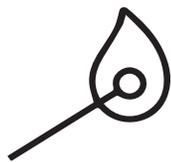
As we search our hearts and days “with God”, the Spirit may reveal our sin and ways we did not walk in God’s presence and graciously invite us to confession. And when we confess our sins to God, “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) He does not begrudgingly forgive us. Richard Foster says it well: “Remember the heart of the Father; He is like a shepherd who will risk anything to find that one lost sheep. We do not have to make God willing to forgive. In fact, it is God who is working to make us willing to seek His forgiveness.”¹

Questions for Missional Community Discussion

1. What beliefs or assumptions sometimes keep us from honest self-examination? How do we sometimes avoid honest reflection?
2. As you reflect on your sin, do you experience Spirit-led conviction or crushing condemnation and shame? How do you discern what you are experiencing?
3. If God already knows us fully, including our sinful thoughts, and still hasn’t left us why do we even need to confess our sin and ask for forgiveness?
4. Do you think God will forgive you when you confess your sin to Him? Why or why not?
5. Have you tried taking time for reflection and self-examination since engaging with part 1 of this guide? If you haven’t, what do you think is keeping you from doing so? If you have, what was that experience like?
6. Spend a few minutes discussing the individual practice for this week, the Examen of Conscience.

Individual Practice on next page...

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INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE: THE EXAMEN OF CONSCIENCE

In part 1, we introduced the Prayer of Examen, a prayer Christians have used for centuries to engage in daily reflection and self-examination. We started with the first part, the Examen of Consciousness, focused on reflecting on God's presence with you throughout your day. If you think about Psalm 139, the Examen of Consciousness reflects David's prayer in vs. 1-18.

Now, in part 2, we will introduce the second part of the Prayer of Examen, the Examen of Conscience. After reflecting on God's presence with you throughout your day, that He knows you fully and never left you, you are then invited to reflect on how you walked in His presence. In the Examen of Conscience, God is inviting you to explore your day, your thoughts, your words, and your actions to see more clearly where you walked in His presence and where you spurned His presence. Because this reflection is rooted in a trust that God both knows you fully and still loves you, this self-examination does not destroy you, but instead leads to genuine confession and repentance.

Ruth Haley Barton writes, "When we enter into the Examen of Conscience, we are willing to listen without defending and to see without rationalizing. We do not depend on our own morbid introspections or keen insights; rather, we surrender ourselves to the Spirit of God, who reveals truth to us as we are able to bear it."¹

One night, before bed, set aside 20 minutes to pray through the Prayer of Examen.
(This can also be done in the morning as you reflect on the previous day.)

As stated in part 1, the steps below will guide you through this time of reflection, but this doesn't have to be a linear, rigid process. Don't worry so much about following the directions and instead use these steps as prompts to help you begin seeing your day with God. Be patient with yourself if you experience distraction or can't remember what you even did today.

We will start by engaging in the Examen of Consciousness you practiced in part 1 and then add on the Examen of Conscience.

Preparation

Spend a few moments in silence and quiet your heart. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly. It's okay if you're coming into this time with your mind racing about the day or what you need to do tomorrow. Remember a key Scripture or prayer God has brought to mind to help you settle into resting in God's presence with you. If you don't have one in mind, rest in the Father's words, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." (Jeremiah 31:3)

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Individual Practice Continued...

Invitation

Invite God to help you as you reflect on your past day. Ask for His help to show you how He was present with you throughout the day.

Review Your Day

Identify the major events of your day, including spiritual practices, meals, meetings, time with others, conversations, work events, etc. Reflect on these, noticing where God was present with you. When did He provide for you? Comfort you? Convict you? Speak to you? Reveal something to you? Protect you?

Give Thanks

Thank God for each part of your day and for being present with you in the ways you just noticed. If there are unresolved issues or questions from your day that you still don't know what to do with, share these with God and thank Him for being with you even in the tension or darkness.

Search with God

Explore your day again with God and invite God to show you where you did not walk in His presence. Pray Psalm 139:23-24:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!

Confess

As God brings moments to mind when you did not walk in His presence, confess these to Him. Explore with God what was happening in your heart. What fears or anxieties surfaced? What need or longing did you have that you sought to fulfill apart from God? What lies did you believe? Confession should be specific and not vague.

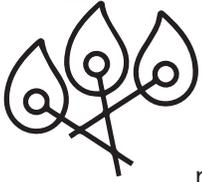
Ask Forgiveness

Ask for God to forgive you and be assured that He will, based solely on the work of Jesus Christ (see 1 John 1:9). Rest in the work of Jesus for you, knowing that you are forgiven and loved by God.

Afterward, God may lead you to also confess your sin to others; especially those who you may have sinned against. Be attentive to where the Spirit may be leading you. The Spirit may also lead you to share what God is showing you with brothers or sisters who know you well and can walk with you, such as your DNA group. We will explore this more in part 4, focused on "Reflection in Community."

Reflection Questions on next page...

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DNA GROUP OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

After you have tried reflection through the Prayer of Examen, find time to meet with your DNA group and reflect together on your experience. Let the conversation go wherever God leads; here are some questions that might be helpful.

1. Did you try to pray through the whole Prayer of Examen, including both the examen of consciousness and examen of conscience? What was your experience like? What did God do in you through that time? How did you feel afterward as you went to sleep?
2. Did God bring specific things to mind as you searched your day with Him to see where you did not walk in His presence? What were those things?
3. Did you feel destroyed or condemned as you saw these? If so, why do you think that was?
4. Did God show you trends or patterns in your life which may reveal areas you need to explore further? Will you share these with your group and ask for their help?
5. Did this process lead you to confession for anything specific? Is the Spirit leading you to confess your sin to some brothers or sisters who can walk with you? James 5:16 says, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."
6. Is this group a safe place to walk through confession, repentance, and transformation together? Be honest about whether or not you feel comfortable with that in this group? Why do you feel that way?