



Search Me, O God

Psalm 139

David Sunday

July 24, 2016

Please turn to Psalm 139. I finished Romans 8 last week, and as I have been thinking about what to share with you this one Sunday before I leave the pulpit for five weeks, this psalm has been continually on my heart.

Let's talk about our blind spots. You have them, and so do I. We all do. I'm talking about those parts of us that are not visible to us, the things we cannot see in the mirror. I was made aware of my blind spots afresh a few months ago when I walked into the kitchen and Kate was looking at me with a quizzical, amused look. Finally, mockingly, she said, "Did you try to shave your own neck?" I said, "Yeah—why not?" Soon, with the help of an additional mirror, I could see why I should not try to shave my own neck.

We all have blind spots. Sometimes they can be embarrassing. At times they can even be dangerous. Anyone who's driven for a while knows what it's like to be sailing comfortably down the highway—perhaps too comfortably—and the next thing you know you're drifting over into the next lane next and another driver lays on his horn, because you failed to check your blind spot. Please understand. It is a grace from God that we cannot see everything there is to see about ourselves. But we do need to be aware of our blind spots—or at least be aware of the fact that we have blind spots.

I read a really searching and wise book this week by a Biola philosophy professor named Gregg Ten Elshof on the subject of self-deception. It's called [I Told Me So](#). This is a great book if you want to learn more about our ability to deceive ourselves, or to be complicit in bolstering someone else's self-deception. He quoted a psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, who by all appearances was not a believer, but who wisely observed this about human nature: "The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change—until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds."

I've been chewing on that reflection. "There is little we can do to change—until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds." Other people sometimes notice what we fail to notice. They can see our blind spots. And too often we don't want to see what they can see,

because we are afraid or embarrassed—or too proud—to admit we need some help. But what if there was Someone Who knew everything that could possibly be known about you—the good, the bad and the ugly—and you knew that He loved you and He was always working for your good? And you knew that nothing He would ever see in you could ever separate you from His love?

If there was Someone like that, wouldn't You want Him to point out your blind spots? Wouldn't you trust Him to show you what you cannot see about yourself? Wouldn't you ask Him to help you notice what you fail to notice? There's little we can do to change until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds. Wouldn't you want to get close to this One Who knows all about you? Who's always working for your good? Who promises that nothing He would ever see in you could ever separate you from His love? Wouldn't you want to get close to Someone like that and say, "Help me; change me"?

That's what David is doing at the end of Psalm 139. This is a psalm that ends with a prayer that you cannot pray too often. I can't get enough of the prayer at the end of this psalm. When I was telling David Sommer that I was going to preach on Psalm 139 this Sunday, he said that in his pastoral counseling, this prayer is how he opens his counseling sessions more often any other way. David said something like this: "Whenever someone is willing to pray this prayer honestly, there's always hope for change." Right?

So I commend this prayer to you today, and I am going to challenge you to pray this prayer every day this week, coming to God with an open heart and saying:

*²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
²⁴ And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!*

The ESV Study Bible says the phrase "any grievous way" means "ways that lead to grief." Here's the New English Translation of these verses:

*²³ Examine me, and probe my thoughts!
Test me, and know my concerns!
²⁴ See if there is any idolatrous tendency in me,
and lead me in the reliable ancient path!*

I've been helped this year by reading the New Living Translation alongside the ESV. Listen to what that translation says:

*²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
²⁴ Point out anything in me that offends you,
and lead me along the path of everlasting life.*

Some people call this a dangerous prayer—and it is a dangerous prayer if you're one of those people who wants to cozy up with your self-deception and live in it. But if you're someone who knows, "I have blind spots," if you're someone who knows, "There are things about me that I can't see in the mirror that I need to change," and you don't want to be sabotaged by your blind spots, then it's wonderful to know there is a God Who loves you, Who knows all about you, and Who can change you as you pray this prayer to Him.

So let's take it phrase by phrase this morning.

Search me, O God and know my heart.

David is not saying here, "Lord, let's get this over with—the quicker, the better." We all know when we go to O'Hare Airport that we're not going to get to our gate without submitting to a search, right? So we put up with it. We know it's necessary to national security, but we don't like it.

When I went to Ukraine a couple months ago, I had to wait for about two hours to get through that line, and I can tell you no one was enjoying the search process. My friend Jeff told me that he just paid \$85 to get the TSA precheck. He can just sail through security now for the next five years. If you know Jeff, you know he is so excited about this new precheck.

Sometimes we want to relate to God like that. "God, the quicker, the better. Let's get this over with." But that's not David's attitude here. David is welcoming God's searching gaze. He is desiring it and rejoicing in it. He wants God to turn the spotlight on him, so he's moving toward God, saying, "I want to get close to You so that Your divine spotlight can shine into my soul. Search me, O God."

David knows God doesn't need his permission to do this. He has already worshiped and stood in awe of the God Who has complete, exhaustive knowledge of him in this psalm. Let's read verses 1-6:

¹ O Lord, you have searched me and known me!

*² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.*

*³ You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

*⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.*

*⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.*

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

it is high; I cannot attain it.

This is our God. He knows all our ways. He knows and understands all our thoughts. He discerns them from afar. He knows all our words. We often open our mouths, not even knowing what's going to come out of them when we speak. Every day we have cause to regret what made it through these two security gates: our teeth and our lips. We get to the end of the day and think, "Aw, I wish I hadn't said that. That was unintelligent, or that was unloving, or that was unkind, or that was inappropriate."

But God knows what we're going to say before we even say it, because what we say comes from the abundance of our hearts—and God knows our hearts completely. He knows everything about us. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and we're never, ever hidden from Him. We can't flee from His presence, David says. God can see in the dark.

¹¹ *If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"
¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.*

God knows all about us, because He formed our inward parts and knitted us together in our mother's womb (verse 13). So our knowledge of God will forever be finite, but God's knowledge of us has always been infinite. We will always need to grow in our knowledge of God, but God has always had complete and exhaustive knowledge of us. God cannot grow in His knowledge, because He knows all there is to know.

And the more you trust Him, the less you'll be threatened by that and the more you're going to want to get close to Him and say, "O God, search me. Turn the light on me." There's great comfort in knowing that He knows all about us, because we don't know ourselves very well.

Imagine being in Berlin during World War II. Bombs are dropping all over the place. Prisoners in their cells are terrified as they howl and beat their fists against locked doors, clamoring to be transferred to safer bunkers. But there's one man who stands like a giant among men—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor. Wherever his fellow prisoners see him, they see a man of great serenity, cheerfulness and confidence. He speaks to his jailors with a friendliness and freedom, like one who is certain of victory.

But in the solitary confinement of his cell, Bonhoeffer is wrestling with doubts about himself, and he's writing a poem called, "Who Am I?" which reads in part:

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were
 compressing my throat,
Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
Tossing in expectation of great events,
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?

“Who am I?” Have you ever wrestled with thoughts like that? Do you ever feel like you’re walking in a carnival of mirrors, not really sure who the real you is? “Am I the tall, skinny one? Or am I the short, chubby one? Am I the guy who’s upside down or right side up? Who am I? Am I what other people say I am? Am I what I think of myself? Who am I?” It can be a torturous thought to consider.

Listen to how Bonhoeffer concludes his poem.

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!

“I am Thine, O Lord. I have heard Thy voice, and it told Thy love to me. I long to rise in the arms of faith and be closer drawn to Thee” (from I Am Thine, O Lord by Fanny Crosby). That’s what David is doing. He’s saying, “Draw me nearer, Lord. Search me, O God, and know my heart.”

Test me and know my anxious thoughts.

It might sound strange to ask God to test you. Most of us do all we can to avoid tests, right? But I found a helpful statement by Pastor Kevin Queen who said:

Temptations come from Satan to ruin us.
Trials come from God to refine us.
Tests also come from God to reveal what’s in us.

You see, ultimately it doesn't matter what other people say about you or think about you. It does not even really matter what you think about yourself. What ultimately matters is what does God think of you? The Apostle Paul understood this. Listen to how Paul appraised himself in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 (NLT). I think this is such a helpful way to view self-assessment in light of our faith in Jesus. This is what Paul says:

As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide. So don't make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due.

That is such a healthy way to navigate life with these hearts of ours and all the human opinions that are floating around us. Paul said ultimately it doesn't really matter what you think or what I think. What matters is what God thinks. He's going to bring it to light.

However David is saying, "God, I don't want to wait until Judgment Day to know what You think about me. I would like to know now, so that I can become a man after Your own heart." So he prays that God would put him to the test and reveal what's true about him. He wants to stand the test. He wants the dross to be removed so the gold can be refined. He wants to stand before God faultless and with great joy.

Look at the context in which David asks God to test him. What do you see there in verses 19-22? You see David dealing with enemies—the enemies of God and his own enemies. David is expressing a zeal for righteousness and a hatred of sin and evildoers. He is filled with righteous indignation against the enemies of God. And it's precisely at this point that David says, "O God, search me and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts." At the moment we are filled with the most righteous indignation then we are more vulnerable to sinning.

Have you noticed that? It's often when we think we're fighting God's cause, when we're standing up for what's right, when we're taking a stand for righteousness—that's when we are in danger of sinning. So David has the wisdom and humility to check himself in at the throne room of God, because he knows a whole lot of sinning happens when people think they're fighting a righteous cause. Blaise Pascal said it well: "We never do evil so fully and cheerfully as when we do it out of conscience, thinking we're standing up for what's right." That's when we're in danger of doing evil, so David says, "Test me and know my thoughts."

See if there be any grievous way in me.

How did the New Living Translation say it? *“Point out anything in me that offends you.”* What an amazing prayer to pray to God! “God, You already know about me thoroughly. I want You to tell me anything in me that offends You—whatever is grievous in me. I don’t want to live in self-deception. I don’t want to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the offensive ways of my own heart. I don’t want to be deluded even by what other people think about me.”

Here’s the truth: It is very possible that we could tolerate sin in our lives just because so many other Christians are doing it. We just look at what other people are entertained by, or how other people handle material possessions, and we think, “Well, everyone is doing it. I must be right.” But David says ultimately it doesn’t matter if I’m fitting in with other Christians. What matters is, “God, what do You think? Is there anything in me that offends You? I want to know, so that I can walk before You, in the fear of You, in ways that please You.”

Albert Speer is a man of whom everyone around him said, “He was a talented architect, a loving family man, and considerate to his circle of peers. They all thought, ‘What a nice guy Albert Speer was.’” But who was Albert Speer? He was the powerful Minister of Armaments and War Production for Adolf Hitler in World War II. Albert Speer was a man who sent people to Auschwitz. How did such a nice guy manage to assign prisoners to torture in Auschwitz?

Well, this is what his memoirs reveal, according to Gregg Elshof: “He diverted his attention so thoroughly and systematically as to render psychologically manageable what would have been morally unthinkable if confronted squarely.” In other words, he never went to Auschwitz. He never looked at what was happening there. He turned a blind eye and a deaf ear. He didn’t want to face it so he could go on thinking that he was not a moral monster.

What David is saying here is, “Lord, don’t let that happen to me.” And David is speaking from experience. He knows what that feels like. He remembers that whole sordid affair with Uriah and Bathsheba. He remembers what it was like to keep silent about his sin and to be groaning day and night. He describes that in Psalm 32. Here in Psalm 139, David is saying, “God, I don’t want to ever experience that again. I want You, God, to confront me squarely with my sin. I want to know the truth about myself. I don’t want to know just what other people think about me, God—I want to know what You think. Point out anything in me that offends You.”

How often do you pray that way to the Lord? How often do you ask God to be doing that in your life? Not, “Lord, help me to see what offends You about him or her. Help me to know what’s in his heart or her heart.” No. Because the longer we gaze into someone else’s sin, we are in danger of falling into that abyss. David says, “Lord, I don’t want to be the watchdog of others.

I don't want to be the one who's holding the standard. I want You to start with me. Tell me what's wrong with me. Point out what offends You in me."

You can be grateful, friends, that God doesn't do this all at once. What if God said, "We're going to take 24 hours, and I'm going to tell you everything about you that offends Me"? First of all, He wouldn't be done at the end of 24 hours. Secondly, you'd be destroyed. You couldn't take it. I couldn't take it. God takes a lifetime, and He is very patient. He's very longsuffering. You can trust Him with this. You're safe in His hands. He will do this in ways that will bring joy into your life, that will produce a harvest of righteousness and peace. You can trust God with this prayer. But we should regularly be asking God to be doing this in our lives, shouldn't we? "Start with me, Lord."

A few months ago I read Psalm 119:29 (NLT), and it's been in my heart ever since. "*Keep me from lying to myself; give me the privilege of knowing your instructions.*" Would you pray this with me? As you pray this way, I would encourage you to be open to how God answers these prayers. He might do it through your Bible reading. He might do it through prayer. He might do it through preaching. He might do it by bringing another human being into your life who is a mouthpiece. It could be a friend. It could be an enemy. However God does this, welcome it.

God, point out anything in me that offends you and lead me in the everlasting way.

Lead me in the way that leads to everlasting life—why? Because "I tend to stray, Lord. I can't find the path of life on my own. I get off that narrow path. I get off the gospel way. I need You, Lord, to lead me to that way. I need You to show me where it is, because I'm ignorant if You don't show me."

David also confesses, "I'm weak." He doesn't just say, "Show me the path, Lord." If he just said, "Show me the path," then he could say, "I'll take it from here. I've got it. Thanks. Thanks for pointing out the way of everlasting life. I'll walk it from here." David says, "No, I'm too weak for that. I need You to lead me. So precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, let me stand. I am weak. Lead me in the everlasting way."

Notice the word 'everlasting' which means that eternity is at stake in this prayer. Your life is just a little dot—and from that dot goes forth a line that goes on forever. A trajectory is being set right now that's going to result in either everlasting joy or everlasting sorrow, either everlasting life or everlasting lostness, everlasting righteousness or everlasting reprobation. We're going to end up in either everlasting heaven or everlasting hell.

Many of the sins we so easily tolerate and overlook in our lives right now would be shameful to us in eternity. Many of the things that taste so good right now have a bitter aftertaste

for eternity if God does not rescue us from those things. Many of the things we think aren't a big deal right now—or on our deathbeds—in further reflection, might look very differently. David prays, “Lord, I don't want to be left to myself here. I don't want to go my own way, like a lost sheep. I need You to lead me in the everlasting way.” I encourage you to pray that prayer this week.

What's the alternative to praying this prayer? If we don't ask God to be doing these things in our lives, what's the alternative? Here it is: blindness to self. A complete lack of self-awareness. Trying to hide from God. Living at a distance from God. Being guided by your own understanding. Living in lots of sin you can't even see. On a trajectory to eternal loss, if God isn't doing this in our lives. How we need Him to do this.

I plead with you, friends, be asking God for this in your life. Pursue greater self-awareness before God. Realize there's a God in heaven Who wants to and Who can remove blind spots in order to lead you in His way. Trust Him to do it. He's the one Person you can trust to know everything about you and to never stop loving you.

There's nothing God is going to find in you that He didn't already know when He sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross for you. Jesus knew exactly what He was dying for when He died for you. He was dying for all those offensive ways we don't even see in ourselves. So if Jesus already died and if Jesus has already set us free so we could be rescued from these things, then shouldn't we be coming before Him regularly, praying:

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

*²⁴ And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!*

We can trust Him with this heart request. We are safe praying this prayer to a God Who knows all about us.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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