



Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

SESSION 2

| Scripture readings: *Psalms 51 and 139*

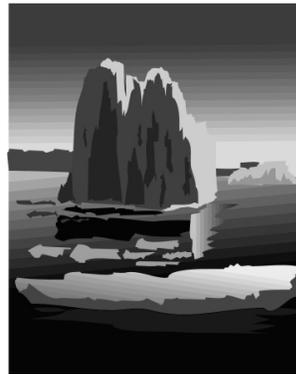
The Need for Self-Examination

Along the path of his “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, riding a young colt and receiving the acclaim of the crowd, Jesus catches sight of the city and laments over her: “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!” (Luke 19:42). Forgiving others is one of the key “things that make for peace,” as Jesus will reveal and embody in his own approaching passion; the renewal of harmonious, spiritually healthy relationships with God and others is the whole purpose of his incarnation. How do we open ourselves to the magnitude of this gift?

One of the greatest impediments to recognizing what makes for peace is our reluctance to look closely at our own heart—what we are actually feeling, imagining, assuming, or pondering. Engaged in ordinary routines, we sometimes move through life like sleepwalkers, not fully conscious of what we experience. It takes a certain level of awareness to name what we are thinking or feeling at any given time. But even when circumstances or relationships are striking enough to sharpen our awareness, all sorts of inner filters—preconceptions, unspoken fears, illusions—can distort an accurate reading of our thoughts and feelings. Consequently, we often react to things without noticing the real motives behind our actions.

If we cannot see how our minds and hearts actually operate, and how they resist the things that make for health and peace, we will not be able to admit what alienates us from God, others, or ourselves. What we cannot acknowledge we cannot confess, and what we cannot confess we cannot present for forgiveness and healing.

Awareness, acknowledgment, and confession are the foundation for seeking and receiving forgiveness. That



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is why self-examination is one of the chief spiritual exercises of the Christian life, especially fitting for Lenten practice. Self-examination is the spiritual art of paying close attention to the dynamics of our hearts and minds. It requires of us nondefensive honesty and humility before God.

Two fundamental truths undergird the practice of self-examination:¹

(1) God loves us without conditions. We can neither earn nor deserve God’s love; it is a gift, waiting to be received by faith and trust. Certainly we can disappoint and distance ourselves from God. But we cannot fall below or outside the web of divine love pervading the whole cosmos. Until we grasp this truth at the emotional core of our being, we will not find sufficient courage to engage in honest and healthy self-reflection. Either we will feel compelled to stretch the truth in order to preserve some shreds of pride, rationalizing our words and acts before One whose love we do not fully trust; or we will collapse into unhealthy self-recrimination, whipping and cursing ourselves in the punishments of self-hatred. Neither of these reactions will help us find healing and wholeness in Christ. God’s absolutely

unconditional love gives us solid ground upon which to stand with the security we need for unflinching honesty.

(2) We are, each and all of us, fallen human beings.

There are no exceptions to the fact that we are sinners, just as there are no exceptions to God's overwhelming love for each of us. Sin is a deeply rooted disorientation in which we tend to see all things primarily in relation to ourselves rather than in relation to God. Everything revolves around the central sun of our little egos. Whether we tend toward the illusion of grandiosity or the illusion of worthlessness, the essence of sin is self-absorption. In its ten thousand expressions, bold and subtle, it remains a persistent framework of the human condition.

Without the first truth we could not find comfort in seeking God's help or summon strength with that help to see ourselves clearly. Without the second truth there would be no need for confession or forgiveness.

Two particular psalms can effectively tutor us in self-examination, helping us more truthfully to observe our spiritual condition. The first is Psalm 51, that classic psalm of penitence used in corporate prayer on Ash Wednesday to mark the beginning of Lent. The second is Psalm 139, one of the most beloved of all psalms for its wondering gaze into the mystery of God's identity and our own. These two psalms reveal two sides of self-examination: "examination of *conscience*" and "examination of *consciousness*."

Psalm 51 and Examination of Conscience

Psalm 51 is a cry from the depths of the soul for God's mercy and cleansing. It expresses great certainty about our human need for what only God can provide: the blotting out of transgression, the cleansing of sin, the purging of iniquity, and the other half of the equation: the re-creation of a pure heart, the gift of wisdom, the restoration of a right and willing spirit. Here is a prayer that recognizes guilt from the moment of birth, and acknowledges that all sin is first and foremost directed against God. It is a penitential psalm of confession and plea for pardon.

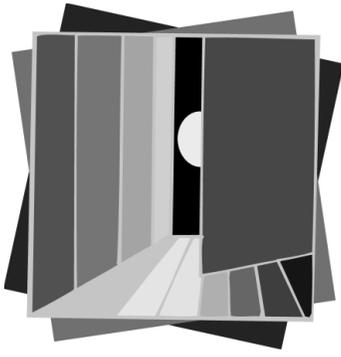
It's a small wonder that Psalm 51 has been interpreted through the millennia as King David's cry for divine

mercy after his wretched episode with Bathsheba. It is easy for us to forget the full measure of David's sin (see 2 Sam. 11). First he indulged in adultery with Bathsheba while her husband, Uriah, was off fighting the king's battles. Then, in an attempt to disguise Bathsheba's resulting pregnancy, David tried twice to manipulate Uriah into breaking military conduct in order to sleep with his wife. When these efforts to cover his tracks failed, David resorted to a successful plot with his army commander to get Uriah killed in battle. The whole sorry tale is worthy of an opera. But with our human penchant for drama, we easily recognize and understand the dynamics of David's story. One offense often draws us into further ill-conceived acts to cover the first. We soon find ourselves on a trail of deceit and manipulation, trying desperately to keep the original offense secret and often implicating others in our sordid ploys.

Psalm 51 is a vivid expression of examination of conscience, which is most appropriate when we know we have committed a serious offense (as King David did) or when our lives have exhibited clear patterns of destructive behavior over time and we need regular checks on how our thoughts, feelings, and actions are progressing. Those who turn to 12-Step programs for help with addiction generally become serious about this form of self-examination and know its great value. Recovery spiritualities often take human sin and the need for rigorous self-examination, confession, and restitution more seriously than many churches do.

Yet examination of conscience has value even if we are not aware of needing it. Because we are so adept at hiding the truth of our condition from ourselves as well as from others, it can be a bracing exercise in true humility to look closely at our lives on a regular basis. We begin by asking God to help us see what we need to see about ourselves. Without the Spirit's aid, we cannot penetrate our inner darkness. Our lives are like icebergs; what we know on the surface is a small fraction of what lies below the water level of waking consciousness. The beauty of how God works with us, when we are willing, is that we are enabled by God to see what we should see and work with.

With the help of God's grace, we begin to search our lives for evidence of "the heart turned in on itself" (Augustine's phrase based on Paul's letters).



Even darkness is not dark to God, who sees through all obscurity. Whether we experience God's all-penetrating knowledge as comfort or anxiety depends, perhaps, on whether we have something to hide in the darkness or are trying to see something through the darkness.

- Where do we feel embarrassed or guilty about what we have done or left undone?
- When have our immediate feelings led us into unkind words or actions?
- Have we allowed others to influence us toward negative judgments of persons we do not really know?
- Do we accept hearsay and gossip without checking facts?
- Where does deceit have a hold on us, and how it is expressed in our lives?

These are examples of the kinds of questions that can help us in a period of examining our conscience. *Examination of conscience* is an explicitly confessional form of self-examination.

Once we have identified some distorted and damaging habits of our mind and heart, we can offer a prayer of confession tailored to our personal condition. It is a great release to pour out our heart before God, to whom we can entrust our most vulnerable truths, in trust that God's unreserved love receives us in mercy and yearns to restore to us a wholesome, renewed life. The heart's plea for forgiveness rises from such confession, along with confidence in God's ready willingness to forgive.

Examination of conscience and confession can be wonderfully cathartic, lifting inner burdens that have weighed us down for years. But there is a broader expression of self-examination as well, called the examination of consciousness.

Psalm 139 and Examination of Consciousness

Psalm 139 also has the character of self-examination but expresses a very different sensibility. First, the psalmist

is not so much examining his own faults as marveling that God examines him, inside and out, knowing him completely. There is no direct mention of sin or guilt here, but a keen awareness of being naked before God with no place to hide—an echo, perhaps, of Adam and Eve's condition in the garden after eating the apple. Maybe you remember times as a child when it seemed your parents could see right through you, and you wondered how they could know what they seemed to know when you were doing your best to conceal it! The sense expressed in this psalm is of being transparent to divine eyes, being encompassed on all sides by a God we cannot escape. But there is ambivalence in the feeling tone—we cannot flee from God's spirit, yet that presence is also comfort and security. At the very farthest limits of human experience, "your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast" (v. 10). Even darkness is not dark to God, who sees through all obscurity. Whether we experience God's all-penetrating knowledge as comfort or anxiety depends, perhaps, on whether we have something to hide in the darkness or are trying to see something through the darkness.

The psalmist goes on to wonder at how marvelously we are made, how intricate the Creator's weaving of life, and how utterly incomprehensible divine thoughts are. He expresses great appreciation and awe for the gift of human life and form. Then the tone shifts suddenly as he allies himself with God against the wicked who hate the Lord, counting them his own enemies as if to say "I'm on your side, God!" Yet the final verses move back to inward reflection, asking God to search and test his heart for any evil that might be found there and to be led in the way of everlasting life.

This psalm is a beautiful expression of examination of consciousness. If examination of conscience unearths large parts of us in need of total rehabilitation, examination of consciousness helps us to get the bigger picture: the good with the bad.

This examination of consciousness is sometimes simply called the *examen*, and is generally practiced at the end of each day. Once again, we come into divine presence seeking the help of the Spirit to see ourselves fully as we are. The focus is on where and when we have experienced God's grace within our day and how we have responded or failed to respond. It is a practice in awareness, an exploration of the contents of our daily

consciousness. So we pay attention to the memorable moments of the day—interactions, situations, activities—and to our inner state in each instance. What were our thoughts, judgments, emotions, beliefs, questions, and observations? Were we conscious of God’s presence or prompting in the midst of a conversation, and if so did we respond in a fitting way? Are we aware in retrospect of how God was indeed with us, but not catching the grace at the time, when we responded to someone in a less-than-helpful way? Do we have no clue of how or whether God was present in the situation at all?

As we learn to notice our actual thoughts, feelings, and responses in various relationships and circumstances, we may start to become more aware of our physical postures and sensations also. Where do we hold tension in our bodies, and what do those tensions tell us about our reactions? What does our posture tell us about our level of comfort or discomfort, both with ourselves and with others? Slowly, we begin to recognize what lies behind our feelings and reactions and to see when we are being motivated by self-interest or self-giving, and when we are directed by fear or guided by love.

In the process of *examen*, as we find within us anxiety, hostility, or self-preservation at the expense of others, we are called to confession. We can then seek God’s forgiveness and help in seeing more clearly and responding more faithfully next time. And as we discern moments of grace in our day where we responded to others or to our own circumstances with understanding, patience, compassion, or wisdom, we rejoice and give thanks! As Richard Hauser puts it, “On our bad days we are affirmed as forgiven sinners; on our good days we are affirmed as blessed children.”² There is no way to lose when we open ourselves to a loving God.

In Psalm 139, the psalmist reveals a broad awareness of himself, including the potential for both good and evil. He is conscious of how he has been fearfully and wonderfully made by God’s hand. In expressing his marvel at divine handiwork, the psalmist gives us permission to acknowledge gratitude for our God-given goodness as human beings. God does not make anything that is less than wonderful and remarkable, much less anything that is worthless! We have the capacity to live in communion with our Creator and with one another because we are wonderful works of God. And every time we see

that we have lived in a way fitting to this purpose, we can celebrate grace.

Toward the end of the psalm, the language changes sharply, expressing intense desire for God to kill the wicked, and avowed hatred of all who hate God. Here we are likely to get uncomfortable. The psalmist is surely being very honest, but this is the kind of language used by religious extremists who see God’s will in their own hatred and violence against those they perceive or label as enemies of God. From the standpoint of modern psychology, we might interpret these verses as an unconscious projection of the psalmist’s own dark side (“shadow”) onto those who do not believe or behave as he does. In our own practice of *examen*, we should hope to recognize this human tendency in ourselves and, before it becomes too deeply rooted, turn to confession and repentance.

Yet the psalmist, in the end, leaves even these intensely hard feelings to God’s wisdom and judgment. He is asking the Lord to search his heart and root out whatever might lead him astray from “the way everlasting.” This sorting through feelings and intentions, this self-offering to God’s mercy and grace, is the essence of self-examination in both its forms. It is surely what the Sioux tribe of last week’s story committed themselves to work through—each one personally and as a community—in order to freely and truthfully extend themselves as kin to the slayer of one of their own.

Learning forgiveness first requires that we clearly see our own need for it. Self-examination is one of the best ways to discover how deep and ongoing our need truly is. Then we can look more objectively at our urge to judge others, which we will do next week.

About the Writer

Marjorie Thompson is an author, teacher, pastor, and retreat leader in the ministry of spiritual formation.

Endnotes

1. This insight, along with other perspectives expressed here, are also treated in chapter 6 of my book *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).
2. Richard J. Hauser, S.J., *Moving in the Spirit: Becoming a Contemplative in Action* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 55.