



# Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

## SESSION 2

| Scripture readings: Psalms 51 and 139

### Goal for the Session

The goal of this session is to learn and engage in the practices of examining conscience and consciousness as a first step in identifying personal needs to forgive and be forgiven.

### Preparing for the Session

- As you begin your preparations, take time to pray for each participant and for yourself as leader. Pray that the reading, journaling, and group meeting time will be guided by the Spirit, leading each person to what he or she most needs to understand or seek at this time to learn forgiveness.
- Be prepared to e-mail or distribute copies of the Participant Handout for the next session. Plan to bring a few extra copies for those who forget to bring theirs.
- Read the Participant Handout for session 2 so you are familiar with the content along with your group.
- Review this Leader's Guide, including the "Teaching Alternatives," and determine the approach you will take to best meet the needs of your group.
- Provide nametags for each participant, including you.
- Set up the room in advance. The recommended arrangement is chairs in a three-quarters circle of single or double rows depending on the number in your group. Set your own chair at one end of the chair arrangement where you can easily rise to reach newsprint or other materials.

### Session at a Glance

#### OPENING

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Transitioning to the topic

#### EXPLORING

- Invitation to self-examination
- Engaging the practice of self-examination
- Small-group sharing

#### RESPONDING

- Journaling

#### CLOSING

- Prayer
- Preparing for the next session

- Have easel, newsprint, and markers available to record ideas and resources.
- Bring several Bibles for those who may forget to bring one. They may be helpful to participants in writing their own psalm-prayers.
- Secure a chime or bell to ring, signaling the end of the personal reflection time.
- Make copies for each participant of the instruction sheet titled "Practicing Self-Examination" found on the last page of this Leader's Guide.

- Write the two sets of questions for journaling on newsprint ahead of time.

## Teaching Tips

- The practice of self-examination is a private matter between an individual and God. It will be important to stress that the small-group sharing after this practice is focused on how participants experienced the process. No one will be asked to share the content of his or her self-examination. You might suggest that if someone does choose to share some selected content with their group, then they invoke the group covenant of confidentiality. Some people are more sensitive to issues of confidentiality than others, so this may be a matter of personal preference.
- When it comes time to invite participants to share selected phrases or stanzas of their psalms in the Closing prayer, remind them that they are free to choose whatever they wish, and only if they are comfortable doing so. Those who have written prayers from an examination of consciousness might share expressions of praise, wonder, or thanks. Even confessional phrases or stanzas may be general enough so participants are comfortable offering them to the ears of the group as well as to God.

## Opening (10 minutes)

### 1. Welcome

Welcome participants as they arrive, taking care to include and introduce newcomers who may have missed the first session. Make sure nametags are available for all.

### 2. Prayer

Great God, shaper of every heart, you have searched us and you *know*. You know who we are and what we are better than we do ourselves. In your great love, reveal us to ourselves. Help us to see what we need to see; help us to accept what you show us; and help us by your grace to act on self-knowledge, so we may become more like the One who courageously set his face toward Jerusalem to enter his passion so that we, too, might be freed for a fully human life. In his name we pray. **Amen.**

### 3. Transitioning to the Topic

Point the group to the two fundamental truths undergirding self-examination, described early in the Partici-

part Handout for this session. Give them a minute to review these two paragraphs. Invite a few volunteers to briefly paraphrase one truth each.

Write the words “love” and “sin” side by side on newsprint and draw a circle around each word. Ask the group which of these is the greater. This is a rhetorical question, since the group will surely recognize God’s love as the answer. As a way to confirm love as the answer, read the following quote from George Fox, founder of the Quaker tradition. It is based on a vision Fox received while suffering over the many temptations and evils he saw people struggling with in the world.

I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. And in that also I saw the infinite love of God.<sup>1</sup>

Pause a moment to let the group absorb the image in Fox’s vision. Then explain that we will be exploring the great Lenten practice of self-examination today, grounded in these two basic truths, and our confidence that the greater truth of divine love encompasses both. Return to the newsprint and invite the group to imagine another way to draw these circles that would symbolize the actual relationship between love and sin. The most obvious option is a large circle for love with a smaller circle for sin inside it. This visual will help the group remember the fundamental truths behind self-examination.

## Exploring (30 minutes)

### 4. Invitation to Self-Examination

Tell participants they are free to choose whether to engage in examination of conscience or examination of consciousness, as described in the Participant Handout for this session. Distribute the instruction sheet titled “Practicing Self-Examination.” Ask everyone to select just one of the two exercises and spend the next fifteen minutes working with it. Invite them to pull their chairs away from the circle and find their own space in the room for this period.

### 5. Engaging the Practice of Self-Examination

Each participant engages with one of the reflection exercises on the instruction sheet, including writing

their own psalm-prayer. As a “participant-leader,” you will need to engage in this exercise yourself, since some portion of your psalm-prayer will start the Closing prayer. I recommend that you work with the Examination of Consciousness, which is more likely to include expressions of praise, wonder, and thanksgiving. A stanza or phrase of this nature would be the most appropriate beginning to the Closing prayer.

## 6. Small-Group Sharing

Ring a chime or bell gently to call participants out of their personal reflection time. Instruct them to pull their chairs into clusters of three or four persons, finding their own small group space in the room where they can hear each other speak.

Invite them to share whatever they choose to share about the *process*, not the content, of their self-examination. Ask, what was it like to reflect on your life in this way and to write your own psalm-prayer? What kind of “journey” did your feelings go on in this process? Remind them that each participant will have just about three minutes to share.

## Responding (10 minutes)

### 7. Journaling

Invite participants to journal about their experience with self-examination. Point them to these two sets of questions on newsprint:

- What have I learned in this process? Is self-examination a spiritual practice I want to continue in some way through Lent, and if so, how?
- In the spirit of self-examination, can I identify one thing I want to be forgiven for, and one person I need to forgive? What first step could I take in each case?

At the end of ten minutes, gently ring the chime or bell. Acknowledge that folks may not have had time to complete their reflections, and encourage them to continue journaling with these questions through the week.

## Closing (5 minutes)

### 8. Prayer

Invite participants to review their psalm-prayers. Ask if there is one phrase, sentence, or even stanza, that they

might feel free to speak aloud as part of a group prayer of praise, confession, and gratitude. Indicate that this will be our corporate closing prayer today; as leader, you will begin with a phrase, then others may offer their own phrases; it is OK to choose not to speak, and silent prayer is always appropriate.

After several have spoken or you have had a few moments of silence, you may wish to add a word of thanksgiving if gratitude does not surface from the group prayers. After three or four minutes, conclude by praying the Lord’s Prayer together.

## 9. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the next session’s Participant Hand-out or indicate that you will send it via e-mail by end of day. Affirm your agreement to read it before the next session.

Remind everyone to bring journals and Bibles to each session. Invite participants to continue journaling this week, particularly around the second set of questions from their journaling today: What do I need to be forgiven for? Who do I need to forgive? What first step might I take in either direction?

## Teaching Alternatives

- Have the group read aloud 2 Samuel 11, the story of David and Bathsheba. Ask a volunteer to start with the first paragraph, then have the person to his or her right pick up with the next paragraph, and so on until the chapter is finished so different voices and inflections are heard. Readers may either pass one Bible around, or read from their own translations.

Ask the group to discuss how they see the dynamic of evil at play in this story. How many sins does David commit here? How do they build on each other? The aim is for the group to see and name how one sinful decision leads to another and then another, until lust, adultery, greed, deceit, manipulation, and implicating an accomplice all add up to murder. Ask, at which points could David have chosen to pull back from this spiral of sin? What do you think propelled him to go on?

Invite the group to think and speak about where they have witnessed a “spiral of sin” in the lives of

well-known figures today or in the lives of those they may know more closely (while being careful not to expose their identity). Then ask them to spend some quiet reflective time examining their own lives for this kind of pattern, even if the sins are more muted, and to write a prayer or psalm of confession for God's ears only. If any choose to share some aspect of their own experience or what they learned from it, thank them for their courage in speaking so honestly.

- Instead of sharing psalm-prayer phrases for the Closing prayer, write a traditional corporate prayer of confession on newsprint and say it aloud together. Or offer a prayer of your own.
- If your group has a strong negative response to journaling, allow for a time of meditation and prayer in the Response period. Invite everyone to reflect on what they have received from God during this session, how their spirit has been touched, and how they feel called to respond in prayer and action.

## Key Scriptures

2 Samuel 11  
Psalm 51  
Psalm 139

## For More Information

Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), chap. 10, "The Discipline of Confession."

Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), chap. 6, "Of Conscience and Consciousness."

Daniel Wolpert, *Creating a Life with God: The Call of Ancient Prayer Practices* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003), chap. 5, "The Examen: God in Day-to-Day Life."

## Endnote

1. George Fox, *Journal*, ed. John L. Nickalls (London: Religious Society of Friends, 1975), 19.

# Practicing Self-Examination

## 1. Examination of Conscience—A Practice in Penitence and Confession

- Open your heart to God’s grace, love, and light. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you clearly see what you need to see and are ready to see within yourself.
- Ask, where do I find evidence in my life of a “heart turned in on itself”? You might find the questions in the 5th paragraph under “Psalm 51 and Examination of Conscience” helpful in relating to your own forms of self-absorption.
- Write a prayer of confession or your own psalm of penitence. Psalm 51 could offer a general model.
- Take time to open your spirit to receive God’s love for you. Accept inwardly a sense of divine forgiveness and invitation to a new future.

## 2. Examination of Consciousness—A Practice in Awareness

- Acknowledge with gratitude that God knows you through and through, loves you, and waits eagerly to summon out what you will become.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to help you review with clarity the past twenty-four or forty-eight hours.
- Identify two or three instances where God’s grace becomes apparent to you in the period under review. Were you aware of it at the time? How did you respond?
- If you recognized and responded in a way fitting the Christian life, give thanks!
- If you were unaware of divine presence or resistant to God’s love, confess and seek to become more aware and responsive in the future.
- Write a psalm-prayer of praise, confession, and gratitude as it arises from your experience of self-examination.