

SELF EXAMINATION IN THE LORD'S PRESENCE

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Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:23-24

There are many reasons why self-examination is not a very popular occupation. Some people already have such strong feelings of guilt and such low opinions of themselves that the thought of cataloging their faults seems like another exercise in self-flagellation. Others have been deluded by the notion that they only have to think positively to overcome their weaknesses, for, after all, they are intrinsically good. Some think that faith cleanses them and therefore they need not go through such a negative process (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 531:7). Others think that if they admit to being sinful people they don't need to look for particular weaknesses; they can simply trust God to save them (see *True Christian Religion* 519).

Many of us do find the courage to examine ourselves, but we don't feel that it is an enjoyable process, and, like a visit to the dentist's office, we put it off for longer than we should. We don't mind being wrong if we were mistaken or misinformed. It isn't so bad if we made an error of judgment. It is far less pleasant if we look deeply into our minds and find that we deliberately do or want evil. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church says that if we examine our *acts* we discover little. If we examine our *thoughts and motives* we discover much. If we ask ourselves what we regard as sin and what we excuse, we discover our real selves (*Charity* 5). If we find that our motives are bad, we cannot escape blame, at least in the privacy of our own conscience. Our pride, our insecurities, and our enemies—the hells—all combine to shield us from such knowledge.

Yet it is a great piece of folly to regard self-examination as a negative thing. It is the first truly positive act of our spiritual lives. The majority of us are never going to know genuine happiness unless we conduct a searching examination into ourselves, see and acknowledge our evils, and begin to turn away from them. If we don't, the Heavenly Doctrine clearly says, those evils will go on living inside of us.

It is a mistake to consider self-examination as a negative, frightening, or threatening thing. Whatever their reasons, people who regard it in this way are making one simple mistake: they are failing to see that we must examine ourselves in the presence of the Lord.

All self-examination must be carried out with the clear, sensitive awareness that the Lord Jesus Christ is present, and listening, and guiding the process. When we are aware of Him, then this apparently frightening step loses its terror.

That is one of the great messages of the 139th Psalm. It is a prelude to self-examination, a song which must be sung before we take that first, most positive step toward heaven.

“O Lord,” the Psalm says, “You have searched me, and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways” (Psalm 139:1-3). When we start to investigate our motives, we need to realize that the Lord has already done it. He is in the room with us, watching and listening, noticing if we have missed something, encouraging us to see ourselves aright, for He already knows. “There is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it” (Psalm 139:4-6).

One of the greatest problems our Lord has in leading us to heaven is our capacity for self-delusion. The things we love we call good, the Heavenly Doctrine says. Our evils delight us. That delight “captivates the mind and banishes reflection” (*Divine Providence* 113), and so we cover them up in our bosoms, as it were, and merely make sure that they don’t appear to the world (see *True Christian Religion* 568). If we want to do something wrong, we can dispel a thousand good arguments against it, using one shaky piece of information as our authority. And our culture does not encourage self-examination; it supports us in a lethal ignorance of some of our worst motives (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 531:7; *True Christian Religion* 519).

How comforting it is to know that the Person to whom we are talking is someone from whom nothing can be hidden.

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me and Your right hand shall hold me. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall fall on me,” even the night shall be light about me; indeed the darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You (Psalm 139:7-12).

Does it not help us if we say these words in prayer before looking into our motives? Can they not help us if we are busy deceiving ourselves about our own feelings, and maybe getting away with this deception in our human relationships? Think about this example: a husband comes home in a bad mood because he made a costly mistake at work, and he finds that his wife has neglected to do something at home. He is angry and blames her far too harshly, leaving her feeling both hurt and guilty. In the quiet of the night he wonders if he has been too harsh and what he ought to do about it. He can think of lots of reasons to justify himself, but the only two people listening, himself and the Lord, know what really happened. What is the use of pretending, either to himself or to the other listener? And when he considers what he should do in the morning, it might seem easy to tell himself that the best course is to let the matter blow over, that his wife will soon get over it. With the Lord listening, however, he will perhaps realize that he should take an action that is less convenient to his own pride.

The Psalm moves on to reflect how all things in us are from the Lord.

For you have formed my inward parts; You have covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are

Your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me when as yet there were none of them (13-16).

Two principal teachings are given here. The first is that the Lord, in His infinite providence, foresees all things, both internal and external with each person, and provides for his or her individual happiness, because He is omniscient. The second is that it is the Lord Himself who is forming us, building within us a love of good, preparing us from birth for happiness. When we acknowledge this, it matters less that He knows our evils, because of the great kindness from which He views them. For His purpose in knowing our evils is to reform us into angels of heaven. He knew our potential weaknesses from birth. He has already built within us heavenly affections from which we can long for the strength to cast them out. He can and wants to create a full and complete angel out of each one of us. "Have I any delight in the death of the wicked?" says the Lord God, "Wherefore turn, and live."

When we reflect on this prayer, can we not agree with the words of the Psalmist that follow? "How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand; when I awake, I am still with You." Yes, we slumber a lot, ignorant of the Lord's presence, but when we wake up, when we pay attention to reality, there He is. The thoughts of His heart are of nothing else than leading each one of us to heaven. And how precious are those thoughts to us.

All too often we do not examine ourselves in the presence of a loving God who created us for heaven and whose providence works for nothing else. We seem alone when we do it; we feel the enormity of our sin, and the hells come close and assure us how very bad we are. Or perhaps, because we are not thinking truly, we suspect that the Lord is angry with us for our evils, ready to wreak some strong punishment on us if we admit to them. The best bet, it seems, is to hide from them.

An illustration of this is found in the Old Testament in the story of Ahab, the wicked King of Israel. He had wanted the vineyard of Naboth, which was next door to his palace. When Naboth would not sell it to him, the king sulked. So the queen, Jezebel, had Naboth accused falsely and killed. And Ahab didn't inquire into the reason for his death; he simply got up and went to the vineyard to take possession of it. There Elijah, the great prophet, came to him. Ahab's first words to Elijah were "Have you found me, O my enemy?" How ironic! The king should have regarded God's prophet as a friend and helper, but he thought of him as an enemy, a bringer of bad tidings. Ahab had hoped Elijah would remain in ignorance of the true circumstances of Naboth's death, even as he had pretended to be. He was angry that he could not stay hidden from this nemesis: "Have you found me, O my enemy!"

Conscience, the presence of the Lord, should never be our enemy. It only seems so when it condemns things we are thinking and doing. But when we look upon the Lord as the loving God who wants us to go to heaven, then we find the true enemy. It is this discovery that is meant in the next words of our Psalm:

Oh that You would slay the wicked, O God! Depart from me, therefore, you bloodthirsty men. For they speak against You wickedly; Your enemies take Your name in vain. Do I not hate them, O Lord, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies” (Psalm 139:19-22).

Sometimes we love our evil thoughts or feelings. Sometimes we hate them. When we are in the presence of our loving God, we hate them. It is of our own faults that these words are speaking, of those things within us that resist the Lord and make us think lightly of His Word, that make us think we can rise up above His laws. When we pray quietly to the Lord, and He lets us see life as it should be seen, then our own faults appear as our enemies. We hate them with perfect hatred.

This is the attitude which the Lord wants us to take with us into self-examination. We have absolutely no need to be afraid of this examination. The only fear we should have is that our scrutiny will not be thorough enough, or that we will not act upon what we see. Self-examination is the step of a strong person who is looking for his weaknesses in order to ensure that they will cease to exist. It is the step of a person who feels that the Lord is with him—so why should he fear? It is the step of a person who is warmed by those loves which the Lord started inspiring into him from the day of his birth and who, at this moment, hates his own evils.

When we feel that kind of strength, we can look honestly at our evils—not just the things that we have done but also the things we have felt and thought and intended. We can acknowledge them, and accept the guilt that properly belongs to us and confess them to the Lord and ask His help to overcome them. These are the next four steps toward heaven, steps made easy by the assurance that the Lord is with us, watching, and encouraging, and approving.

“Search me, O God,” Psalm 139 says. So, too, let us say “I want you to search me, O God, and know my heart. I want you to try me and know my thoughts. I want you to see, and to let me see, if there is any wicked way in me, and to lead me in the way everlasting.”

So, the next time we need to examine ourselves deeply and thoroughly, let us remember this beautiful prelude to introspection. Let us make sure that we have invited the Lord’s presence before we begin, that we feel He is with us and we are conversing with Him. Let us remember that He knows every bad thing we have ever thought or felt or done, and He not only still forgives us but wishes to give us true forgiveness, which is the absence of evil. Then self-examination can become, if not a pleasure, a source of contentment and of strength—a step toward life eternal.

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 139; *True Christian Religion* 567:6-7