



# CHAPTER SIX

## Self-Examination: An Essential Step

In a conversation with a psychologist friend, he told me: “The number of sessions required with patients facing external conflict issues are far less than those who struggle with internal conflict.” He was speaking from his personal experience in his practice. I think he’s right.

Because external conflict is more identifiable, practical steps toward resolve are often more recognizable. But the internal unrest conceals itself from us, and that’s more difficult to notice.

Like Gideon, the greater enemy is within, capable of creating tremendous distress. He wasn’t confused about who the external opponent (the Midianites) was. What’s visible is identifiable. What we cannot see requires self-examination to help us begin to see what’s hidden.

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My friend’s practice is thriving. He has a waiting list of new potential patients desiring to see him and his colleagues. The reason is that there are a lot of people who are tired of living with a consistent feeling of distress.

Becoming aware—and

tired—of the “feeling of distress” encourages us to examine its cause. Although we may not immediately identify what’s producing our discomfort, becoming self-aware is the first step in facing the enemy within.

Observing the physical damage and destruction caused by a natural disaster allows us to quickly recognize signs of distress (destroyed homes, electricity, water shortage, loss of employment, etc.) As tragic as these distresses are, we also understand that they are temporary and will find resolve in time. However, for some people, distress symptoms may linger for weeks, months, or longer.

Often, a person’s internal distress has a negative residual effect that influences their relationships with families and friends.

Here’s a short list of signs of internal distress:

- Eating or sleeping too much or too little.
- Anger, feeling edgy, or lashing out at others.
- Overwhelming sadness.
- Not connecting with others.
- Lack of energy or constantly feeling tired.
- Feeling like you must stay busy.
- Having unexplained aches and pains (i.e., stomach or head).
- Feeling helpless or hopeless.
- Inordinate worry or feeling guilty, but not sure why.
- Thinking of hurting or killing yourself or someone else.

- Excessive smoking, drinking, or using drugs (including the misuse of prescription medications).
- Struggling to readjust to home or work life.<sup>8</sup>

Some suggest that self-examination is too indulgent, believing that excessive contemplation of oneself is like “navel-gazing.” But God thinks otherwise.

In Lamentations, we are encouraged to self-examine. “Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord!” (Lam. 3:40).

In Psalm 139:23-24 we learn to ask God to help us in self-examination:

“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!”

God sees us and knows us intimately. He observes in us things we cannot see. The Psalmist makes this clear:

“You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even before I say it, Lord. You go before me and follow me...”  
(Psalm 139:3-5a, NLT).

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<sup>8</sup> Source: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/warning-signs-risk-factors>

**Prayerfully and consistently reflecting on one's inner life is not selfish—it's essential.**

Interestingly, we rarely think twice about the importance of reflecting on our goals or projects. But to intentionally take time for introspection is too often neglected. I'm more comfortable reviewing my financial portfolio than my character flaws. However, Christ is more interested in seeing my life conformed to His image than my accomplishments.

Self-examination requires a healthy perspective of God.

It can be painful to *intentionally* focus on our sins and failings, especially if we view God as solely punitive. For years, that was my view of God. Rather than run toward God, I chose to hide from my Creator. It was too painful—and fearful—for me to honestly converse with God about my struggles. I was aware of my sins and failings. However, my unhealthy fear of God made it difficult for me to confess, repent, discover forgiveness, and grow in grace.

However, as I began to seriously examine the stories recorded in the Bible, I recognized that God goes out of His way to reach us, to love and care for us, and that because the consequence of sin is death, God desires to spare us from the torment of sin. Slowly, my perspective of God was changing.

*Self-examination requires a healthy perspective of God.*

Gradually, I began to discuss my sins and failures with the One who created me. Rather than continuing to run *from* God, I was running *to* Him.

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Self-examination is beneficial. It's also dangerous! The adversary of your soul (Satan) will consistently try to subvert your self-examination

by pulling you down into self-condemnation and despair. If all we see is our sins and failures, we miss seeing God's grace afforded to us in Jesus. We have two eyes. One must always be focused on God's grace, while the other eye observes our sin. This examination process—one eye on God's grace in Jesus and the other on our sin—gives clarity.

Holy Scripture (revealed in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible) helps us to understand Scripture and allows us to know what sin is. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see our sins.

Transformation is not instantaneous. Paul teaches, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Positionally, that is factual. Practically, we continue to struggle with the old (2 Peter 2:20-22). Our sinful nature consistently resurfaces, and we must rely on Christ's salvation and the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome sin. The process is ongoing as we gradually become transformed into

Christ's image.

That's why self-examination requires our intention. Without a desire to honestly and purposefully find time for introspection, we are prone to drift through life, unaware of what God sees and what transformation He wants to accomplish in us. The Psalmist expresses his desire—and need for God—to identify the areas requiring transformation. “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!” (Psalm 139:23-24).

*Self-examination (with God) encourages honesty and displays trust in the Lord, our source of great comfort.*

Because God knows everything (139:1-6), David trusts God to reveal his anxious thoughts, hidden motives, and offensive ways.

David recognizes that examining his life with God is a discipline that demonstrates his loyalty to the Lord and leads to an everlasting (prolonged and enriched) life. Self-examination (with God) encourages honesty and displays trust in the Lord, our source of great comfort. Setting aside specific time to examine your life is not only beneficial; it's essential! Reviewing our life is vital to growth as a follower of Jesus.

The philosopher Socrates said: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” One way we can become intentional about examining our

ways is to incorporate a regular “Prayer of Examen.” Ignatius of Loyola observed that if you drop any prayer time from your day because of busyness or tiredness, the prayer of examen should be the last one to relinquish. The reason is that busyness, fatigue, preoccupation, or distractions can keep us from examining our lives.

This prayer practice encourages gratitude, petition, discernment, forgiveness, and resolution. Here’s a simple and effective way to implement this intentional practice.

### **Schedule.**

An athlete training for competition understands the importance of routine. Exercise and training are disciplines (practices) that require consistency.

- Consider setting a timer on your phone to alert you.
- Pay attention to your natural rhythms. Are you a morning or evening person? At what point in the day will a 5- to 15-minute pause be best for you? There is no right or wrong time. You determine the time and duration of the prayer that works for you.

### **Release.**

Life can be stressful, filled with anxieties, busyness, and distractions.



- Quiet yourself. Take a minute to let go of the day's stress to refocus your attention on God.
- Calm yourself by breathing in deeply, then exhale fully.
- Enjoy this gift of silence as you relax in God's presence.
- Remember, God is with you and dearly loves and cares for you.
- Notice what you feel. What's it like to be held by God? If your day has been stressful, imagine Jesus speaking: "Peace; be still" (Mark 4:39).
- In stillness, offer a prayer (silently or softly spoken): "Speak Lord; your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:9). Or, "Lord God, have mercy on me" (Luke 18:13).

### **Request.**

- Ask God for the grace to see whatever He wants you to see.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your remembrance those things He desires you to recall.
- Ask for clarity and understanding.  
"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, find; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7:8).  
"Open my eyes, Lord" (Psalm 119:18).
- Remember: God loves to talk with you and hear from you.

## Review.

- With your Heavenly Father, review your day and ask Him to recognize when you were with Him or moving away from God's love.
- Resting in God's love, notice what comes to mind.
- Was there a moment when you noticed God's presence? Possibly in a sunrise or sunset. Perhaps in an encounter with someone?
- Was there a troubling event that aroused anger or resentment, a moment when you obeyed—or disobeyed—the Lord?
- How did you feel then? What are you noticing now?  
*Remember, you are loved by God, even in your failures.*
- Were there moments when you experienced faith, hope, and love (*consolation*)?
- When did you experience a sense of loss or distance (*desolation*)?
- With each recollection, be grateful, thanking God for all you've noticed.
- From all you receive, are there one or two specific things you want to address with God? Do so.
- Is there something you feel God desires to address with you? Be still and listen.

*Using a journal to write down what you notice is a great way to enter into a dialogue with God.*

## **Repent and Rejoice.**

Trusting in God's relentless love and with a grateful heart, rejoice because of all God has brought to your remembrance.

- Take a moment and recall your sins that God has graciously allowed you to see. *Remember, you noticed this because God loves you.*
- Acknowledge your sin(s) and admit you are sincerely sorry, asking God to forgive you and to be merciful to you, a sinner.
- Thank God for His mercy and forgiveness, and rejoice because God “greatly” loves you.

## **Resolve.**

- Now, take a moment with the Lord and make some practical, concrete, and doable resolutions that you will attend to with God's help for the next period of the day.
- You may want to write these simple, practical resolutions in your journal. They will remind you of your desire to be with God and be mindful of God's presence throughout the day.

## **Return (slowly).**

With a grateful heart and joyful anticipation, slowly return to the rest of your day, knowing God is with you in all you do.





