

# Prayerful Review: A Brief Guide to Self-Examination

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*For if you live according to the sinful nature you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live” (Romans 8:13).*

God’s command to us is, “Be holy as I am holy.” The New Testament is filled with specific instructions which make clear just what this holiness is to look like in our daily life. Our experience of daily life, however, falls far short of God’s standard of holiness. Rightfully aware of our persistent waywardness and cautious about a false perfectionism, we often end up resigning ourselves to a life of sin rather than a progressive growth in holiness. Rightfully cautious of a false legalistic approach to holiness, we often end up at the mercy of our passions rather than cultivating inward transformation through cooperation with the Holy Spirit in appropriate means of “putting to death the misdeeds of the body.” We are often unaware both of our own responsibility for growth in holiness and of the power God wishes to offer us for growth in holiness. Consequently we do not make use of the means available for spiritual growth and labor under unnecessary burdens.

One important means of growth in holiness used by Christians throughout the centuries is called “self-examination.” It is simply the act of prayerfully thinking over the events of one’s day at the close of the day, often paying special attention to areas of life in need of improvement. The eighteenth-century Anglican divine William Law writes of this practice, “This examination of ourselves every evening is, therefore, to be considered as something that is as necessary as a daily repentance and confession of our sins. Daily repentance has very little significance and loses all its chief benefit, unless it be a particular confession and repentance of the sins of that day.”

A variety of techniques for this self-examination have been developed in the history of spirituality. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, suggests that you might begin by choosing particular sins to be addressed. After committing yourself to obedience upon rising in the morning, you would then review your practice regarding the sin in question at noon and in the evening. You mark your progress made in the sin and notice the various factors that influence the power of that sin and victory over it. William Law, along with Jeremy Taylor, another Anglican, encourage a more general review of the day, asking for pardon for what went amiss in the day and giving thanks for what was good. Both emphasize the need for a deliberate review and attention to the “prevailing temper” surrounding the moments of victory or defeat.

Puritan father Jonathan Edwards frequently emphasizes the use of particular passages of Scripture in self-examination. Using this technique you would select passages of Scripture that are appropriate to your personal growth in holiness (for a list of scriptures appropriate for this use cf. *Praying the Scriptures*, 136-37). Then, in the evening, you would set aside a little time to prayerfully rehearse the day reflecting on (1) the activity of your thoughts, feelings, words, and actions, in light of (2) the sense of the passages of Scripture. A similar approach can be taken toward evening reflection on liturgical prayers, such as the general confession found in the Book of Common Prayer. With liturgical prayers, each phrase of the prayer is used as a stimulus toward particular reflection (“we confess that we have sinned against You,” “in thought,” “in word,” “in deed”).

Many emphasize the use of self-examination as a tool for learning to recognize the presence and activity of God in their lives. David Mains, a contemporary minister, calls his approach to self-examination the “God Hunt.” In an evening God Hunt you ask, at the end of the day, “Where did I find God in my day today?” Then you review the day, playing back the “video-tape” of your memory and looking at the day scene by scene, noting those places where God’s presence or guidance was recognizable. Then you responds by acknowledging this presence or action of God

in prayer.

Self examination is especially helpful when used in conjunction with the discipline of keeping a journal, for the journal can be used for recording your progress in areas, noting factors influencing growth in holiness, writing personal prayers, and copying special Scriptures, songs, prayers or quotes from books that can stimulate your reflection.

Self-examination is aimed at informing daily life. By noticing patterns at the end of the day, we hope to be able to recognize the same patterns next time, even earlier. During the day, try to recognize (1) when you are at a "crossroads," hearing the invitation of God or the attack of an enemy and needing to respond, (2) when elements usually leading to a particular sin are pressing upon you, or (3) when you are in a position to gain victory in a matter. At times it can be helpful to use some physical symbolic act to note these events during the day. For example a surreptitious placing of the hand on the breast can symbolize your awareness of sin and confession/repentance which responds to that awareness ("beating your breast"). A slight "pricking" up of the ear may symbolize the hearing of the voice of God. A "No!" at any volume responds to the enemy's voice. Clapping the hands gives praise to God for victory. Pay careful attention to the dynamics of your relationship with God in these matters: times of greatest strength or vulnerability, particular accusations of the enemy toward which you are susceptible, motivations by which you are especially encouraged, and so on. Utilize the leadership of the Holy Spirit and the companionship of a good friend or spiritual mentor to help you create creative and particular steps to "put to death the misdeeds of the body" and cultivate the Spirit where appropriate.

Self-examination need not be a depressing habit of morbid introspection. Rather it can be an honest and thankful review of the day, thanking God for victory and pressing on toward further growth in holiness. Remember, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).